https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2936-9798

VILNIUS UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE OF LITHUANIAN LITERATURE AND FOLKLORE
LITHUANIAN ACADEMY OF MUSIC AND THEATER

Gintarė Sereikaitė-Motiejūnė

# Navigating Agency in Polygamous Marriages: An Ethnographic Study of Muslim Women's Experiences within Islamic and Societal Contexts

**DOCTORAL DISSERTATION**

Humanities,
Ethnology (H 006)

VILNIUS 2026

The dissertation was prepared between 2019 and 2026 at Vilnius University.

**Academic supervisor** – Prof. Dr. Victor Celestin de Munck (Vilnius University, Humanities, Ethnology, H 006)

This doctoral dissertation will be defended in a public/closed meeting of the Dissertation Defence Panel:

**Chairman** – Assoc. Prof. Dr. Rasa Pranskevičiūtė-Amoson (Vilnius University, Humanities, Ethnology, H 006).
**Members**:
Assoc. Prof. Dr. Jurga Bučaitė-Vilkė (Vytautas Magnus University, Social Sciences, Sociology, S 005),
Prof. Dr. Fawwaz Ayoub Hamdan Momani (Yarmouk University, Jordan, Social Sciences, Psychology, S 006),
Prof. Dr. Rasa Račiūnaitė-Paužuolienė (Vytautas Magnus University, Humanities, Ethnology, H 006),
Assoc. Prof. Dr. Lina Šumskaitė (Vilnius University, Social Sciences, Sociology, S 005).


The dissertation shall be defended at a public meeting of the Dissertation Defence Panel at 15:00 on 27 March 2026 in Room 201 of the Faculty of Philosophy (Vilnius University).
Address: Universiteto St. 9, Room 201, Vilnius, Lithuania
Tel. +370 5 268 7256; e-mail: fsf@vu.lt

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Gintarė Sereikaitė-Motiejūnė

# *Įsigalinimo* raiška poligaminėse santuokose: etnografinis musulmonių moterų patirčių tyrimas religiniame ir socialiniame kontekstuose

**DAKTARO DISERTACIJA**

Humanitariniai mokslai,
Etnologija (H 006)

VILNIUS 2026

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# INTRODUCTION

Polygamy refers to a marital practice where an individual has multiple spouses simultaneously. It is categorized primarily into polygyny (a man having multiple wives), polyandry (a woman having multiple husbands), and group marriages involving numerous people. Polygamy's historical roots lie in ancient civilizations, often stemming from social and cultural practices rather than explicit legal codes. For instance, in ancient Babylon, polygyny addressed socio-economic needs such as population management (Khatun, Islam 2023). While monogamy was typical in Greece and Rome, polygynous unions occasionally occurred among elites to solidify political alliances or ensure inheritance through heirs (Scheidel 2009). However, these arrangements carried risks, such as competing claims over wealth that could fragment rather than consolidate resources.

Polygyny functioned as a pragmatic solution to socio-economic and demographic challenges in many ancient societies (Larsen 2023). During periods of war, for example, high male mortality rates created demographic imbalances. Polygyny helped mitigate these by ensuring widows and their children were cared for, thereby preserving stability and population balance. Women in these societies were often financially dependent on men, making it challenging for widows to sustain themselves, further emphasizing the role of polygyny in providing economic support and stability (Ember et al. 2007).

In certain cultures, a transition into monogamy often followed religious and legal reforms. Christianity, for example, promoted monogamy as the moral ideal and enshrined it in legal frameworks across western societies. At the same time, Islamic teachings from the 7th century only permitted polygamy under strict conditions, to reflect the societal needs of the time.

To avoid conceptual ambiguity in the following discussion, it is important to clarify how the term "polygamy" is being used in this study. In the majority of academic literature, the term "polygamy" is adopted as a general term. It is also the term predominantly used by the research informants, including members of the Facebook group and the Jordanian women. For this reason, when discussing polygyny in Islam—where a man can marry up to four women—the broader term "polygamy" is used throughout this study.

Islamic teachings address polygamy explicitly in the Quran, allowing a man to marry up to four wives on the condition of fair and equal treatment, with a focus on justice and responsibility (Quran 4:3). This rule aimed to address specific historical issues, such as providing for war widows and orphans (Beddu 2023). The Hadiths further reinforced these principles, with

an emphasis on responsibility rather than indulgence. Over time, cultural, social, and economic factors have shaped interpretations of these teachings, and influenced the practice's application across a variety of contexts.

In contemporary times, in Muslim-majority countries, the legal and cultural frameworks surrounding polygamy are deeply rooted in Islamic jurisprudence while adapting to modern social norms, including gender equality and women's rights. For instance, Jordan's Personal Status Code requires men to meet specific conditions, such as proof of financial capability and a guarantee of fairness when supporting multiple wives. This focus on fairness aligns with Islamic teachings on equal treatment in marriage, which addresses financial, emotional, and time commitments while also reflecting contemporary ethical concerns about justice and equality within marital practices.

Cultural factors significantly influence polygamy in Muslim communities, where traditional gender roles often place men as household heads and financial providers while women manage the home and raise children, leaving them financially dependent. This dynamic, rooted in Islamic law and cultural norms, can make widows and their children vulnerable upon a husband's passing. If the husband's male relatives, such as brothers or uncles, are available, they are expected to take care of the widow. Polygamy is sometimes viewed as a practical solution, where integrating widows into polygamous households to provide social and economic stability, ensures their needs and those of their children are met, while preserving family cohesion.

However, women in polygamous marriages often navigate intricate family dynamics that require emotional resilience and adaptability. They may find themselves balancing the expectations of their roles as wives, mothers, and co-wives, often within a framework that prioritizes male preference and decision-making. This dynamic can lead to complex relationships between co-wives as they negotiate shared responsibilities and navigate the emotional intricacies of their familial roles.

Additionally, women in these unions are often primarily viewed as caregivers within the family. They are usually not employed outside the home; instead, they dedicate their lives to raising children and managing household responsibilities. This traditional expectation of their role often begins early, as many women marry young, and enter adulthood within the confines of a marital relationship. Marrying at a young age limits their opportunities for education and professional development, leaving them financially dependent on their husbands.

This lack of economic independence deepens their reliance on male decision-making within the household. Men usually take on the role of

breadwinners, and they wield significant control over the resources that sustain the family. This economic imbalance reinforces traditional gender roles, limiting women's autonomy and often leaving them in a vulnerable position should conflicts or challenges arise within the marriage.

Societal changes in Islamic communities are gradually reshaping traditional gender roles, with more women pursuing education and seeking professional careers. This growing emphasis on higher education is equipping women with knowledge and skills that enable them to assert their independence, both financially and socially. As a result, women are becoming less reliant on men, creating a challenge to conventional norms that have long defined their roles within the family and society. This shift is empowering women to explore new opportunities, advocate for their rights, and contribute more actively to community and economic development. By breaking away from the constraints of dependency, they are redefining their place in modern Islamic societies and fostering a more inclusive approach to gender dynamics.

Contemporary discussions on polygamy often centre on the interplay between women's rights and gender equality. While such arrangements frequently draw criticism for fostering emotional struggles and perpetuating inequality, it is equally crucial to highlight the strength and adaptability women demonstrate within these relationships. These debates underscore the need to not only address the challenges posed by traditional structures, but also the ways in which women actively exercise their agency to shape and redefine their roles within these settings.

Agency, often misunderstood from a western perspective as merely resistance or rebellion against norms, encompasses a broader spectrum of actions and choices. It involves the capacity to act independently and make choices, not just in opposition to societal norms but also in alignment with them. This duality allows individuals, particularly women in polygamous marriages, to navigate their roles within cultural and religious frameworks. Agency is about making informed choices that reflect personal beliefs and values, whether that means challenging existing structures or embracing them. This nuanced understanding of agency highlights its role in empowering women to assert their identities and influence within their communities, and demonstrate resilience and adaptability in diverse social contexts. By recognizing agency as both resistance and conformity, we can appreciate the complex ways women engage with and, indeed, shape their environments, advocating for their rights while honouring their cultural and religious identities.

**Research Focus**

This research is based on ethnographic interviews conducted with women living in Amman, Jordan, who are either in polygamous marriages or have close family members in such marriages, as well as material drawn from a closed Facebook group comprising Muslim women in polygamous marriages from different geographical contexts. The study examines how these women understand and justify polygamy in contemporary settings, paying particular attention to how they articulate perceived advantages, disadvantages, and challenges associated with these circumstances.

First, the analysis highlights the diverse ways in which women in this study describe and navigate factors they associate with polygamous marriages. In their accounts, social expectations, cultural norms, and religious interpretations emerge as important elements shaping their experiences. For some women, religious texts and practices provide a framework through which polygamy is understood as a legitimate or meaningful marital arrangement, while for others these interpretations are sources of tension and negotiation.

At an individual level, participants described motivations ranging from economic considerations to personal beliefs and family-related aspirations. The study examines how women weigh these factors while responding to social pressure and engaging with complex and sometimes competing religious interpretations. Rather than presenting these motivations as uniform, the analysis focuses on how decisions to enter or remain in polygamous marriages are articulated differently across specific empirical contexts.

Second, the study explores how polygamy is described by participants as an ambivalent experience. In these women's narratives, polygamous marriages are often associated with emotional strain, feelings of neglect or competition, and unequal relational dynamics. Accounts point to situations in which women experience vulnerability, emotional distress, and limited autonomy within marital and family structures.

At the same time, some participants describe polygamy as providing forms of material security, companionship, or social support, particularly in situations shaped by economic hardship or social isolation. In certain accounts, shared responsibilities and cooperative arrangements among co-wives are described as practical strategies for managing everyday life. These narratives illustrate how women articulate both constraints and possibilities within polygamous marriages, without reducing their experiences to either purely negative or purely positive evaluations.

Rather than offering a generalized assessment of polygamy or women's lives more broadly, this study presents a contextually grounded analysis of

how polygamy is discussed, experienced, and interpreted by the women participating in this research. By acknowledging the ambivalence and complexity present in their narratives, the study aims to contribute to more nuanced and empirically based discussions concerning women's agency within polygamous marriages.

### Research Question

How do Muslim women in polygamous marriages express and negotiate their sense of agency within the frameworks of Islamic teachings and societal expectations?

### Hypothesis

Muslim women in polygamous marriages express agency by navigating and negotiating religious and social expectations in ways that allow them to assert their autonomy. In so doing, they strengthen their own sense of self.

Muslim women in polygamous marriages leverage religious and social expectations to create spaces for their agency, enabling them to redefine their identities and assert their autonomy in a manner that challenges traditional norms.

### The objectives of the work

1.	To conduct a literary analysis of texts that depict the experiences of Muslim women in polygamous marriages, examining how these experiences reflect and shape concepts of identity and autonomy within the frameworks of religious and social expectations. The analysis will cover historical, legal, social, and psychological aspects related to polygamy and its impact on women's lives and rights.

2.	To critically examine various theoretical frameworks, with a particular focus on those addressing agency and Islamic feminism, to explore how they can provide insights into the experiences of Muslim women in polygamous marriages. This involves an in-depth engagement with these theories to assess their relevance and coherence, ultimately constructing a comprehensive conceptual framework. The resulting framework will serve as a foundation to guide empirical research grounded in lived realities.

3.	To conduct a holistic exploration of the diverse expressions of agency among women in polygamous marriages, focusing on how they understand and navigate their relationships. This task involves analysing personal narratives and recorded discussions to uncover common themes

related to emotional, social, and religious dynamics. This task is divided into two distinct phases:

3.1.     The first phase adopts a holistic approach through interactions within a Facebook group, to provide a comprehensive view of how Muslim women perceive and feel about polygamy. This phase emphasizes an inclusive perspective, free from social or racial constraints and focuses on a broad understanding of the experiences and perceptions of Muslim women regarding polygamous relationships.

3.2.     The second phase is a targeted study involving women in Amman, Jordan who have direct or indirect experiences with polygamy. It includes women who are either first or second wives or those who have close connections to polygamous situations within their families. This phase aims to gather detailed insights into their specific experiences and how these experiences shape their agency and understanding of polygamous dynamics.

Together, these phases offer an in-depth exploration of the specific experiences of polygamous marriages and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of agency as it is articulated by Muslim women within particular social and cultural contexts.

**The structure of the work**

In Part One of my research on polygamy, I delve into its complex and multifaceted nature through a comprehensive literature review. I trace the historical context of polygamy by uncovering its roots in ancient civilizations and examining how its acceptance and legal status vary across different contemporary societies. This review also explores the sociocultural and religious dimensions of polygamy, particularly within Islamic contexts, where I analyse how specific interpretations of the Quran are used to justify this practice. I also reflect on the psychological and emotional impacts of polygamous marriages on women, recognizing the challenges they face, such as jealousy, stress, and the reinforcement of patriarchal structures. Through this analysis, I aim to explore how polygamy is understood and experienced in relation to gender roles and individual rights within the specific empirical contexts examined in this study.

In Part Two of my research, I explore the concept of agency through the lens of Muslim feminism and other theoretical frameworks. Rather than viewing agency solely as resistance, as often perceived in Western contexts, this approach also encompasses acceptance and religious agency. This nuanced understanding recognizes that agency can manifest in multiple forms, including through alignment with cultural and religious norms.

Muslim feminism provides a critical foundation for this exploration, emphasizing the reinterpretation of Islamic texts to advocate for gender equality. Scholars such as Amina Wadud (1999, 2006) and Asma Barlas (2001, 2002) challenge patriarchal interpretations, advocating for a contextual understanding of the Quran that supports justice and equality. Their work highlights how Islamic teachings can be leveraged to empower women, therefore redefining traditional roles.

This theoretical part also draws on reflexivity-based approaches to agency in order to capture how individuals reflect on their social positions and navigate structural constraints. This perspective supports the analysis of agency as a contextual and processual phenomenon shaped by, yet not reducible to, social and religious structures.

Building on these theoretical perspectives, this part of the study shifts the analytical focus from viewing polygamy solely as a form of subjugation toward examining how women navigate and negotiate their roles within polygamous relationships. By analysing diverse expressions of agency, it explores how women articulate their identities and make sense of their experiences in ways that resonate with their beliefs and values, including practices of both acceptance and resistance.

In Part Three of my work, I examine an online community of Muslim women from various corners of the globe who are connected through their shared experiences with polygamy. This digital platform serves as a critical space for support, open dialogue, and the shaping of perceptions surrounding polygamous relationships. The community offers a safe environment in which members can share personal stories, seek advice, and provide comfort to one another, fostering a sense of solidarity and understanding.

Unlike traditional studies that might focus on external social contexts, this analysis centres on the conversational dynamics and interactions among participants within this online space. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how women articulate their lived experiences and navigate the complexities of polygamous marriage in contemporary settings. Through this exploration, my research aims to highlight the transformative potential of online communities in shaping discourse around polygamy. It offers a unique perspective on how digital interactions contribute to ongoing discussions about gender, religion, and social justice as they emerge within Muslim women's online and local communities.

In the final part (Part Three) of my research, I delve deeper into the study conducted in Amman, Jordan. This part of my study centres around nuanced expressions of agency among women in polygamous relationships. This study encompasses first and second wives, as well as women whose close

relatives, for example, mothers and aunts, have been part of such marriages. Through in-depth interviews and discussions, I examine how these women express agency, balancing acceptance and resistance within their cultural and religious contexts. Some women exercise agency by embracing traditional roles and finding empowerment in fulfilling duties that align with their values and beliefs. Others navigate these relationships by subtly challenging norms, negotiating their roles to carve out spaces of personal empowerment and autonomy.

These expressions of agency illustrate a complex interplay between personal convictions and societal expectations, showcasing how women manoeuvre within the constraints and possibilities of polygamous settings. By examining these diverse manifestations of agency, the research contributes to a broader understanding of gender dynamics, highlighting the capacity of women to adapt and assert themselves in ways that resonate with contemporary social justice discourses.

This study combines two qualitative approaches: an online ethnographic study conducted within a private Facebook group and in-depth ethnographic interviews carried out in Amman, Jordan. The online component allows for the examination of discussions and narratives shared by women engaging with the topic of polygamy in a digital environment. Meanwhile the interviews provide insight into how polygamy is understood and experienced within a specific local and cultural context.

Rather than aiming to provide representative or generalizable conclusions about Muslim women or polygamous marriages as a whole, this study seeks to offer contextually grounded insights into how agency is articulated and negotiated within specific empirical settings.

### Methodology
This study combines virtual ethnography with fieldwork conducted in Amman, Jordan, employing methodological triangulation to explore women's experiences of polygamy. It adopts an ethnographic approach understood not as a single method, but as an interpretive orientation aimed at understanding lived experiences and everyday meanings. In contemporary anthropology, ethnography is characterized by sustained engagement with the research field, the use of qualitative methods, and attention to how social actors themselves understand and narrate their everyday realities (Geertz 1973; Hammersley & Atkinson 2007).

Empirical material for the study was generated through a combination of semi-structured interviews, participant observation, reflexive field notes, and virtual ethnographic observation. Rather than seeking statistical

representativeness, the study prioritizes depth, contextual understanding, and interpretive richness, which are central features of ethnographic research (Geertz 1973, 7–9). Following Geertz's notion of thick description, ethnography is approached here as an interpretive practice grounded in participants' own categories and narratives. As De Munck (2000, 88–91) notes, meaning-centred ethnographic understanding emerges through close attention to how people construct and organize meaning through everyday language, categorization, and social interaction, rather than through externally imposed analytical frameworks.

Within this broader ethnographic framework, the study can be characterized as virtual ethnography, grounded in sustained observation of group membership, engagement in discussions, and an effort to understand social phenomena from within the online community. The analysis focuses on women's digital narratives, expressions of emotion, and community-based discourses as they unfold in the online setting.

As a researcher, I went beyond the role of merely observing and engaged in the virtual space by commenting on posts, participating in discussions, and, in some cases, contacting group members through private messages in order to clarify their experiences or obtain additional information. These individual interactions occasionally developed into brief exchanges conducted both synchronously (in real-time chat) and asynchronously. Such interactions supplemented the research material and made it possible to capture not only publicly articulated positions but also more personal and individualized experiences.

Although the period of fieldwork in Amman was relatively short, the research was guided by an ethnographic approach to presence in social space. In addition to conducting eighteen semi-structured interviews, I maintained a field diary to recorded daily observations, documenting informal conversations and patterns of interaction among family members. Engagement with the research field also extended to everyday activities, including visits to participants' relatives' homes and participation in conversations among extended family members. I also interacted with individuals who assisted with travel, translation, and access to informants, whose involvement facilitated communication and navigation within the field.

During the fieldwork period, the number of tourists in Jordan was relatively low due to high temperatures and the Eid al-Adha holiday. As a result, local residents often showed increased curiosity toward my presence. Drivers and passersby occasionally inquired about my activities, and when informed that I was conducting research on polygamy, these encounters frequently developed into spontaneous conversations in which participants

voluntarily shared their views on the topic. These informal interactions contributed additional contextual insight and enriched my understanding of the research setting.

In Part One of the research, I use virtual ethnography. Virtual ethnography is a method of studying online cultures and communities by immersing oneself in digital environments to understand how people interact, form identities, and create meaning within these spaces. It adapts traditional ethnographic techniques to the digital space and allows researchers to explore the cultural and social dynamics of online interactions. This approach is particularly valuable for capturing the unique forms of intimacy and community that develop online, which are often consistent across various digital platforms (Beaulieu, 2010).

One of the key strengths of virtual ethnography is that it allows to study cultures and communities that exist primarily or partially online, providing insights into how digital technologies shape social interactions and cultural practices (Tolbert, Johnson 2019). It enables researchers to capture real-time data and interactions, offering a dynamic and immediate understanding of cultural phenomena as they unfold online (Coleman, 2010). Additionally, virtual ethnography allows for the study of global and dispersed communities, helping to understand how people from different geographical locations interact and form connections in digital spaces (Grijalva, 2021).

Part One of the study examines a private Facebook group restricted to women, without geographical limitations, and open to participants from diverse locations.

Although there are numerous Facebook groups that address the topic of polygamy, most of them are mixed-gender and publicly accessible. This particular group was selected for several reasons. It was a private group, which provided a basic level of anonymity for its members, and it was the most active among the private groups reviewed, both in terms of the volume of content and the level of member engagement. In addition, the group explicitly focused on women's experiences, which allowed for a closer examination of the perspective relevant to this study and for the analysis of discourse from within, that is, through the voices of women living in polygynous marriages.

The virtual ethnographic observation was conducted from January 15 to July 15, 2023, and included both synchronous interactions (real-time chats) and asynchronous content (posts, discussion threads, comments).

During this stage of the research, very short, superficial, or entirely irrelevant comments were excluded from the dataset. Posts that did not generate sustained discussion or contained fewer than five comments were not included in the analysis. All analysed posts were written in English; however,

they frequently contained Arabic terms, particularly religious and cultural concepts such as *Allah* (God), *sabr* (patience), and *deen* (religion). These terms were written using Latin characters according to the spelling conventions commonly employed by participants in the online discussions, rather than formal academic transliteration standards. This linguistic practice reflects a form of religious identity characteristic of diasporic contexts, in which English discourse is interwoven with Islamic vocabulary.

A total of 500 posts, comments, and discussion threads were selected for an in-depth analysis. The selection process prioritized entries that extended beyond brief opinions and instead included personal reflection, emotional engagement, or moral reasoning. Particular attention was given to posts that articulated emotional experiences such as jealousy or emotional pain; offered religious interpretations or justifications; or revealed expressions of agency—for instance, through narratives describing a conscious decision to become a second wife. Posts addressing interpersonal relationships, including conflicts between co-wives or efforts to cultivate a sense of "sisterhood," were also included, as they provided insight into the relational and affective dimensions of women's experiences.

The analysis was conducted following the thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which consists of six sequential phases. First, all selected materials—including posts, comments, and discussion threads—were read repeatedly in order to achieve familiarity with the data. During this phase, initial impressions were noted, with particular attention paid to recurring motifs, emotional expressions, and patterns of language use.

The next stage involved initial coding. The data were coded manually using an Excel spreadsheet. Each meaningful fragment, such as a quoted post or comment, was assigned one or more open codes capturing its central idea. Examples of such codes included religious justification, emotional pain related to the first wife, and the conscious choice to become a second wife. This open coding process allowed for close engagement with the data while remaining attentive to participants' own modes of expression.

Subsequently, the codes were grouped into broader thematic categories that gradually formed the structure of the analysis. At this stage, themes such as religious legitimacy, agency, emotional experiences, discourses of sisterhood, and forms of community support became apparent. These themes were then reviewed in relation to the original data in an iterative manner, in order to ensure internal coherence, empirical grounding, and sufficient distinction between themes.

Each theme was then defined and named, with descriptions outlining its core meanings, dominant interpretations, and representative data excerpts.

This process resulted in the development of the final analytical framework. In the final stage of analysis, the themes were further organized into three broader thematic clusters, each supported by empirical evidence quotations. The analysis aimed to demonstrate how women structure their experiences, articulate religious reasoning, express forms of agency, and navigate interpersonal relationships within polygynous families.

Virtual ethnography captures community dynamics that are central to participants' experiences. As Grijalva (2021) notes, online environments facilitate interaction, advice-giving, and emotional support, allowing researchers to examine how community members support one another and negotiate shared meanings. In the context of polygamous relationships, such spaces enable women to articulate personal struggles and engage with others facing similar circumstances.

Anonymity is a key characteristic of online settings examined through virtual ethnography. As noted in the literature on cyberethnography and online qualitative research (Hampton 2017; Hine 2015; Kozinets 2019), text-based interaction and reduced visibility can lower social risk and encourage more open communication. Although anonymity limits demographic verification, it often results in candid and emotionally rich narratives, particularly in discussions involving sensitive and stigmatized topics (Sugiura et al. 2017). The use of anonymous posts as research material is therefore consistent with established practices in virtual ethnography.

In this study, virtual ethnography enabled the identification of recurring patterns related to agency, identity formation, and community support within the Facebook group. Rather than situating participants within fixed sociocultural categories, the analysis foregrounded women's own interpretations and meaning-making processes, highlighting how virtual spaces can function as sites of reflection, mutual support, and experiential articulation.

Although virtual ethnography provides access to naturally occurring discussions and spontaneous, emotionally rich narratives, this research approach also has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the actual identities of participants cannot be fully verified. Group members may act anonymously or use pseudonyms, making it impossible to reliably confirm their social status, geographical location, age, or other demographic characteristics. As a result, participants' statements cannot be firmly situated within a clearly defined socio-cultural context, which limits the scope of interpretation. Second, the data are subject to self-selection bias. Participation in discussions is voluntary, and only a portion of group members actively contribute content, while many remain observers. Consequently, the

perspectives expressed in posts and comments cannot be considered representative of all women experiencing polygamy, even within the group itself.

The virtual setting also presents limitations related to observation and control. The researcher cannot access the full spectrum of interactions within the group and is restricted to content that is publicly visible. Non-verbal cues, such as tone of voice, bodily expressions, or emotional states beyond textual articulation, remain inaccessible. In addition, posts may be edited, deleted, or influenced by interactions not visible to the researcher, which may affect the completeness of the data. Platform-specific factors, including algorithmic filtering on Facebook, may further shape the content that becomes visible to the researcher at any given time.

Some of these limitations, however, functioned as methodological advantages. Group members communicated primarily in English, and their geographical origins were not explicitly emphasized or clearly identifiable. This lack of demographic specification shifted the focus away from nationality, social status, or local cultural frameworks and foregrounded participants' own interpretive perspectives. Rather than situating their experiences within specific national or cultural contexts, women articulated their understandings of polygamy through shared religious references, emotional resilience, and processes of inner reflection.

In this sense, the group provided a space strongly oriented toward an emic perspective, centred on women's self-reflections concerning their religious and emotional experiences. For the purposes of this study, this emic perspective was analytically significant, as it aligned with the research aim to examine women's lived experiences and meaning-making processes from within their own discursive and moral frameworks.

Prior to commencing the research on the Facebook group for women in polygamous relationships, I reached out to the group administrator to seek permission to utilize the group's content for academic purposes. This permission was granted, allowing the study to proceed with full transparency and ethical compliance.

The Facebook group in which the virtual ethnography was conducted was a private community where each new member was reviewed and approved by the moderators. The moderators were responsible for ensuring that no men or minors were admitted, as the group's internal rules clearly stated that it was intended for adult women only.

The group also allowed its members to post and comment anonymously, and this option was used frequently by participants—approximately 60 percent of the analysed posts and comments were made anonymously. For

those contributions that were not anonymous, user profiles were reviewed to ensure that the participants were adult women and that no accounts appeared to belong to men or minors. The Facebook platform itself does not automatically anonymize users, and profiles remain visible to other members unless anonymity is chosen by the user.

Anonymization was therefore carried out by the researcher during both data collection and analysis. All usernames, profile references, and any identifying details were removed or replaced with pseudonyms. Where content from the Facebook group was used, participants' posts and comments were paraphrased instead of reproducing verbatim. All identifying details were removed, and the text was rewritten to preserve the original meaning while making the comments untraceable online. Direct quotations in their original wording were not used to further protect the participant privacy.

All collected data were stored securely on an external encrypted drive accessible only to the researcher.

These steps complied with the established ethical guidelines for internet-based research (Sugiura et al., 2017; Eysenbach, 2001) and were designed to ensure that the participant privacy was protected and that none of the individuals could be directly identified in the dissertation or through public online content.

Part Two of my research entailed an ethnographic research trip to Amman, Jordan, which took place between June 10 and July 1, 2024. I explored contemporary perspectives on polygamy through direct engagement with local women. Amman was chosen as the field site because it provides a socially and culturally relevant setting to explore how Muslim women experience polygamy and reflect on their roles in connection with religious and societal expectations. In Jordan, polygamy is legally permitted under Islamic law but is also shaped by modern values and social changes. This makes it a suitable context for examining how women interpret religious principles and form their sense of agency in everyday life. In addition, my previous experience in the country and personal connections helped me to reach participants more easily and to better understand the local cultural environment.

Informants were selected through purposive sampling, a common practice in ethnography, whereby participants are chosen based on their relevance to the research questions rather than through random selection (Bernard 2011, 143–147). Access to participants was further facilitated through snowball sampling, as initial contacts introduced the researcher to other women willing to share their experiences. This approach was

particularly suitable given the sensitive nature of the topic and the importance of trust, familiarity, and social networks in ethnographic fieldwork (ibid.).

This research involved conducting 18 semi-structured interviews and engaging in informal discussions, offering a nuanced understanding of how polygamy is perceived and practised within Jordanian society today. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. One full interview corresponds to approximately 18 pages of transcribed text. The research approach did not involve full verbatim transcription of every interview. Instead, the focus was on transcribing thematically significant segments, omitting filler words, repetitions, and irrelevant digressions. This selective transcription strategy is consistent with the recommendations for a qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and is justified by the aim to record participants' core meanings and narratives rather than every linguistic nuance.

The semi-structured interviews were organized around specific thematic areas to ensure a comprehensive exploration of the topic. The interviews were carried out in both Arabic and English, with the assistance of a local interpreter to ensure accurate communication and understanding. Initially, participants were asked about their general understanding of polygamy, providing a baseline for further discussion. Further questions examined whether polygamy was still considered functional and necessary in the present-day society or if it became outdated. These thematic blocks allowed for flexibility in conversation, encouraging participants to share personal insights and experiences while maintaining a structured approach to data collection.

Informal discussions supplemented the interviews with individuals I met locally in Amman, as well as discussions with family members of women who were in polygamous relationships and wanted to talk and share their perspectives. These conversations provided additional context and depth, revealing the social and cultural dynamics that shaped attitudes towards polygamy in Jordan.

Ethnographic research, as a method, focuses on immersive observation and interaction to gain a deep understanding of cultural practices and social phenomena. The use of semi-structured interviews aligns with the methodological recommendations of Bernard (2011) and Spradley (1979), who emphasize their effectiveness in balancing guided inquiry with the freedom to explore unanticipated topics that emerge during interviews. This flexibility is essential for capturing the complexity of cultural practices such as polygamy, which are influenced by historical, religious, and social factors.

The data from both stages of the research—the virtual ethnography and the fieldwork in Amman—were analysed using thematic analysis based on

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model. This method was chosen because it is flexible and suitable for finding recurring meanings in different kinds of qualitative data, both written and spoken. The analysis started with familiarizing myself with the material by repeatedly reading the notes, posts, and interview transcripts. Then I carried out inductive manual coding to identify meaningful ideas, emotions, and experiences shared by the participants.

The codes were grouped into broader categories, which then developed into preliminary themes. These themes were later reviewed, compared with the original data, and refined to make sure they accurately represented participants' accounts. Each final theme was given a name and a short description to define its main focus and meaning.

Throughout the process, I kept analytic notes to track emerging ideas and to observe how similar patterns appeared in both data sets. This integrated approach, which combined the written data from the Facebook group and the spoken interviews, helped to identify the main themes and subsequently present them in the analysis, in order to show both individual and collective ways in which women experience polygamy.

The fieldwork in Jordan was conducted in Amman and its surrounding suburban areas. This geographical focus reflects a deliberate methodological choice rather than an attempt to represent the entirety of Jordanian society. As the capital city, Amman constitutes an urban social context shaped by different socio-economic backgrounds. However, the findings of this study do not claim to represent women's experiences across all regions of Jordan, particularly rural areas or other local contexts. Instead, the research offers a situated ethnographic account grounded in the specific social setting in which the fieldwork was conducted.

While the study does not claim statistical generalizability, its ethnographic value lies in the analysis of meanings, practices, and moral reasoning as articulated by the participants themselves.

The research on women in polygamous relationships in Amman was meticulously designed and executed in strict accordance with the Guidelines for the Assessment of Compliance with Research Ethics. The study received formal approval from the Research Ethics Committee at the Faculty of Philosophy and the Institute of Asian and Transcultural Studies at Vilnius University. The approval covered both stages of the research—the virtual ethnography and fieldwork in Amman—ensuring that all parts of the study were conducted in accordance with ethical standards.

Throughout the research process, significant emphasis was placed on safeguarding the rights and well-being of all participants. Informed consent

was a cornerstone of this study, with participants being fully briefed on the study's aims, methods, and their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Confidentiality was maintained, with personal data anonymized to protect participants' identities and ensure their privacy.

Cultural sensitivity was ensured by allowing participants to frame their experiences of polygamy in their own religious and social terms, without imposing external evaluative frameworks, and by situating their narratives within the specific cultural contexts in which they were produced. These ethical considerations were essential for fostering an environment of trust and openness during the research process.

### Literature review

The theoretical part of this work examines the key materials that underpin the study, focusing on two main types of scholarly contributions. The first type explores polygamy within the Islamic and sociocultural context, shedding light on its origins and the ways it has influenced and shaped societal structures over centuries.

Mahmood Mamdani's work *Beyond Rights Talk and Culture Talk* (2000) examines polygamy in Islamic societies, arguing that it is not inherently tied to Islamic doctrine but shaped by historical and cultural contexts. He shows how changing socio-economic and political factors influence its prevalence over time and highlights how it helps uphold patriarchal structures and subordinate women. Mamdani's analysis aligns with Judith Tucker's views in *Women, Family, and Gender in Islamic Law* (2008), which link polygamy to systemic gender inequality. Both emphasize polygamy's socio-cultural roots and its role in sustaining power hierarchies. Judith Tucker explores how polygamy reinforces traditional gender roles and supports patriarchal structures within Muslim societies, focusing on the regulation of women's behaviour and mobility in such marriages.

Fatima Mernissi, in *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (1975), critiques patriarchal interpretations of Islam, arguing that polygamy contradicts the Quran's core message of equality and justice, framing it as a form of gender discrimination harmful to women. In her book *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (1991), Mernissi further examines how historical and cultural influences of patriarchal interpretations distorted the original message of the Quran. She emphasizes that early Islamic practices, such as polygamy, were introduced as temporary solutions to specific societal challenges (e.g., caring for war orphans) but were later treated as universal norms, contradicting Islam's ideals of equality and justice.

The second type of scholarly works examined in this study comes from the field of psychology and focuses on the impact of polygamy on women's emotional well-being and overall mental health. Psychological studies on polygamy primarily focus on the emotional challenges women face, such as insecurity, competition, and psychological stress and they provide essential context for understanding the environment in which women assert themselves.

When examining the psychological impact of polygamy on women, researchers consistently emphasize the emotional challenges and distress that arise from sharing a spouse, which can severely affect mental well-being. For instance, a systematic review and meta-analysis by Shaiful Bahari et al. (2021) synthesizes the findings of 24 quantitative studies that examine the psychological impact of polygamous marriage on women and children in comparison with monogamous family structures. The analysis found that women in polygamous marriages were more than twice as likely to experience depression than women in monogamous marriages (OR = 2.25; 95% CI: 1.20–4.20). In addition, one of the individual studies included in the meta-analysis further reported that 58.4% of polygamous wives exhibited low self-esteem, while 64.1% reported social withdrawal and feelings of loneliness.

Similarly, a quantitative cross-sectional study by İbiloğlu et al. (2018), conducted in Diyarbakir, Turkey, examined the psychological effects of polygamous marriage by comparing polygamous and monogamous husbands. The study found that polygamous husbands reported higher overall psychological distress than monogamous husbands (Global Severity Index: 0.76 vs. 0.58), as well as elevated levels of specific psychiatric symptoms, including psychoticism (0.53 vs. 0.33) and hostility (0.82 vs. 0.62).

Lindsay Dianne Shepard's work, *The Impact of Polygamy on Women's Mental Health: A Systematic Review* (2013), confirms that women in these marriages frequently encounter significant emotional distress, which worsens as unfair treatment arises among co-wives. Lastly, Moti Pangkam's study, *A Systematic Review on the Impact of Polygamy on Women's Mental Health* (2024), provides a comprehensive overview which underlines the detrimental psychological effects of such marital arrangements on women across various sociocultural settings, increasing their vulnerability within patriarchal frameworks.

The broader effects of polygamy remain underexplored in scientific literature, particularly regarding both its negative emotional impact on women and the ways women may redefine their roles in such marriages and sometimes find new ways to exercise agency.

Debra Majeed's book *Polygyny: What It Means When African American Muslim Women Share Their Husbands* (2015) highlights how the

socio-cultural context and migration significantly shape polygamous marriages among African American Muslims and Muslim immigrant communities in Europe. The author explores how some co-wives reframe their roles as empowering, though these marriages often favour men, driven by needs like care, heirs, or migration. Cultural traditions and migration factors, such as men marrying second wives abroad for support or children, heavily influence these unions. However, these arrangements can lead to secrecy, conflict, and hardship, as women frequently face emotional distress, inequitable power dynamics, and limited options to leave, especially when they are financially or socially vulnerable.

Majeed also documents how some wives view such polygamous arrangements as liberating rather than oppressive. She highlights that for these women, polygamy can provide economic security, a support network among co-wives, and personal autonomy, depending on the sociocultural context. Ultimately, a woman's experience within a polygamous marriage is profoundly shaped by her capacity to express herself, empower her choices, and assert her agency in navigating the complexities of such a union.

Muslim feminism becomes critically important when discussing topics like gender dynamics and religious principles in Muslim societies. This framework not only challenges patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts, but also bridges the gaps between faith and feminist principles, allowing for a nuanced exploration of women's rights within cultural and religious contexts. Two prominent figures at the forefront of Islamic feminist scholarship are Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas.

Amina Wadud, renowned for her groundbreaking book *Qur'an and Woman* (1999), challenges traditional interpretations of the Quran that have perpetuated gender inequalities. The author advocates for egalitarian readings that underpin spiritual equality, emphasizing that male-dominated scholarship in Islam has historically shaped patriarchal understandings of gender roles. Wadud focuses on reclaiming women's agency in interpreting Islamic texts, and in doing so, highlights the ethical and compassionate core of Islam that supports gender equity. Particularly, she criticizes the practice of polygamy by arguing that the Quranic emphasis on justice inherently limits its practicality in modern contexts, underscoring monogamy as closer to Islamic ideals of mutual love and support.

Similarly, Asma Barlas is a key voice in Islamic feminist theory, known for her critical work *Believing Women in Islam* (2002), which deconstructs patriarchal interpretations of the Quran. The author introduces a hermeneutic approach grounded in the Quran's principles of *tawhid* (divine unity), justice, and incomparability, arguing that patriarchal domination over women

contradicts the very essence of Islamic teachings. Barlas challenges conventional views of polygamy, emphasizing that it is permitted in the Quran under context-specific circumstances, primarily aimed at addressing social justice for orphans. She concludes that promoting polygamy as a general practice disregards the Quran's deeper emphasis on fairness and equality, which underscores the impracticality of maintaining justice in such arrangements.

Both authors are pivotal for their reimagined approaches to Islamic texts, paving the way for interpretations that resonate with the ideals of gender justice while remaining faithful to the ethos of Islam. Their scholarship not only critiques patriarchal norms but also empowers women to reclaim their agency within religious frameworks, making their perspectives indispensable to anyone exploring the intersections of Islam, feminism, and gender equality.

For the sake of an in-depth analysis, I draw on diverse literature, including Judith Butler's work, which provides valuable insights into the construction of gender and the ways it intersects with discussions on Muslim feminism. Butler is a pivotal figure in feminist theory, known for her exploration of gender, power, and identity. Her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) introduces the concept of gender performativity, arguing that gender is not an innate quality but is constructed through repeated actions that conform to societal norms. This idea highlights the potential for resistance, as altering these performances can challenge oppressive structures.

In *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (1997), Butler presents the paradox of subjectivation, where power both constrains individuals and enables them to exist as subjects. The author explains how the internalization of societal norms creates identity but simultaneously limits autonomy. Both scholarly sources are vital for understanding agency within restrictive frameworks like polygamy and religious contexts. Butler's theories illuminate how women might negotiate, resist, or reconfigure norms to assert their identities while navigating power structures, offering nuanced insight into the interplay of agency and subjugation.

Saba Mahmood is a pivotal scholar in feminist theory and anthropology, renowned for her innovative work on agency, ethics, and piety within cultural and religious contexts. Her groundbreaking book *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005) offers a profound critique of Western feminist frameworks by examining the women's Mosque Movement in Egypt. Mahmood challenges the dominant view that agency must be equated with resistance to oppression, instead introducing a more nuanced understanding of how agency can manifest within systems of power and cultural norms.

*Politics of Piety* is particularly significant in the study of polygamy and religious practices, as it underscores the importance of understanding agency within the cultural and ethical frameworks of the women involved. Mahmood argues that actions often dismissed as compliance or submission—such as veiling or engaging in traditional gender roles—can embody a form of agency rooted in religious devotion and personal ethical cultivation. For Mahmood, these practices are not merely acts of conformity, but are deeply embedded in the values and aspirations of the individuals who undertake them.

The works of Wadud and Barlas provide a strong foundation for reinterpreting Islamic texts, emphasizing justice and equality as core principles, while Butler and Mahmood expand the exploration of gender dynamics and agency within broader cultural and philosophical frameworks. Together, these scholars open up nuanced pathways for understanding women's roles, offering diverse tools to examine identity, agency, and empowerment in religious and cultural contexts.

### The novelty of the work

The study examines women's experiences of polygamous marriages through two empirical layers: narratives articulated within a transnational online community and ethnographic interviews conducted with women living in Amman, Jordan. Together, these materials allow for an in-depth examination of how women articulate and negotiate their experiences within specific social and religious contexts.

This research introduces a perspective by prioritizing the voices and experiences of the women themselves. Unlike many existing studies that predominantly focus on the negative aspects of polygamy, such as subordination and psychological distress, this work shifts the lens to explore how women navigate, adapt, and make sense of these complex relationships. The novelty of this study lies in its exploration of women's agency and self-perception in a context often perceived as restrictive. The research highlights how women in polygamous marriages articulate their own experiences of agency, meaning-making, and self-reflection.

This approach engages with critiques of Western feminist frameworks that have frequently approached Islamic practices primarily through the lens of patriarchal oppression.

Instead, this study reveals the diverse forms of agency these women exercise, offering insights into how they negotiate their identities and act within social and religious frameworks that are culturally and contextually meaningful. It provides a platform for women to express how they find

meaning and self-worth even within circumstances that are often described as limiting.

By presenting these alternative narratives, the research contributes to debates on women's agency by offering empirically grounded insights into the forms of action and self-perception that emerge within religious and social frameworks often described as restrictive.

### Limitations

The scope of this study is necessarily limited. The findings are based on a combination of 18 in-depth interviews conducted in Amman, Jordan, and a virtual ethnographic analysis of online discourses. While the interviews offer context-specific insights grounded in Jordanian socio-legal realities, the online data—although valuable for accessing diverse and self-expressed narratives—lack clear socio-cultural markers such as geographical location, class, or religious orientation. As such, interpretations of agency and empowerment drawn from these virtual sources remain less clearly anchored in specific socio-cultural frameworks.

The study does not aim to generalize across Islamic societies but rather provides a situated and exploratory contribution that highlights the complexity of women's experiences. These insights should be understood as contextually bounded, while also pointing to the value of further cross-cultural and comparative research.

### AI Usage Declaration

I hereby declare that this work employs Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools strictly for the purpose of enhancing language fluency, ensuring an academic tone, and improving grammatical accuracy. AI has not been utilized to write the content, perform research, or generate any new information presented in this work.

AI tools, such as *Grammarly*, *ProWritingAid*, *Hemingwayapp* were specifically used to improve text quality by shortening sentences, avoiding repetitive wording, correcting grammatical errors, clarifying ideas and enhancing the academic tone. Its application was limited to refining the existing content while maintaining the original ideas and research integrity.

No information or data has been sourced or created using AI in the preparation of this work. The ideas, structure, and analysis were in their entirety developed independently.

# 1. POLYGAMY IN GLOBAL AND ISLAMIC CONTEXTS: FORMS, IMPACTS, AND LEGAL DYNAMICS

## 1.1 The complex history and modern dynamics of polygamy

The practice of polygamy has a long history, dating back to ancient times (Farahmand & Rezvani, 2019). Polygamy continues to be a complex and multifaceted institution, with varying degrees of acceptance and legality in different societies. According to Rohmadi et al. (2022) the term 'polygamy' etymologically stems from the Greek words 'apolian' and 'gamos', signifying 'wife' or 'partner'. In essence, it refers to having multiple spouses simultaneously.

Polygamy is a marital practice in which one person is married to multiple partners. It comes in several forms, primarily polygyny, polyandry, and group marriage (Zeitzen 2008).

> 1. Polygyny: This is the most common form of polygamy (Shepard 2013), involving a man having more than one wife at the same time. This form of polygamy often arises in societies with increasing complexity and socioeconomic stratification (Galieva 2021).
>
> 2. Polyandry: This is a less common form of polygamy that involves a woman being married to more than one husband at the same time.
>
> 3. Group Marriage: Also known as a polyamorous relationship, this form of polygamy involves multiple men and women being married to each other simultaneously.

Brandon (2016, 346) argues that polygamy was widely accepted because it could maximize fecundity and ensure paternity, thus benefitting males who invested in parenting. Despite the ideal of multiple wives, it is noted that most men in polygamous cultures remained socially monogamous due to resource constraints and the scarcity of females.

Polygyny is widely recognized as the most common form of polygamy (Zeitzen 2008; Shepard 2013; Damtie et al. 2021), however the term "polygamy" is often used to refer to polygyny, further emphasizing its prevalence (Ember et al. 2007). As a reminder, as noted in the introduction, I have chosen to use the term "polygamy" to refer to the form of marriage in Islam, where a man can marry up to four women. This decision stems from its familiarity and widespread use among my research informants, including members of the Facebook group and Jordanian women.

The history of polygamy dates back to ancient times and is evident in various regions around the world. In ancient civilizations such as Babylon, Greece, and Rome, strict monogamy was the legally recognized form of marriage. However, outside of these civilizations, polygamy was commonly practiced and accepted. In the context of polygamy, Marianne Brandon's *Monogamy and Nonmonogamy: Evolutionary Considerations and Treatment Challenges* (2010, 344) provides an insightful analysis of human mating strategies. The work emphasizes that long-term monogamy is unusual in the animal kingdom, with only about 3% of mammals practicing social and sexual monogamy. Notably, it reveals that even species once believed to be lifetime mates have been discovered to indulge in extra-pair mating. Brandon (ibid.) points out that humans share biological similarities with polygamous chimpanzees and non-monogamous bonobos. This suggests that humans might be evolutionarily adapted for both polygamy and non-monogamy, adding another layer of complexity to our understanding of human relationships.

From the historical perspective, polygamy, specifically a form of polygamy where a man has more than one wife, has a diverse and complex history across different societies worldwide. While it is difficult to trace the exact origins of polygamy due to its prevalence in prehistoric cultures, it was widely practiced in many societies globally, including those in Africa, Asia, and even among indigenous communities in North America (Fenske 2015).

In Europe, the practice of polygamy has historically been less common, mainly due to the establishment of socially imposed monogamy. The acceptance of polygamy began to decline with the advent of Christianity and other monotheistic religions, which generally advocated for monogamous relationships (MacDonald 1995). This shift continued in the late Middle Ages This shift was maintained through various social controls and ideologies, including the influence of the Christian Church and later political activities by women and lower- and middle-status men (ibid.).

The European marriage pattern, which emerged around the 16th century, was characterized by late marriages and a significant proportion of individuals never marrying (Guilland, van Zanden 2015). This pattern was distinct from its emphasis on monogamy, neolocal residence, and a relatively strong position for women within marriage (ibid.). It was marked by a high age at marriage, particularly for women, and a large share of single individuals, which helped restrain population growth and reduce Malthusian pressures. This system also facilitated human capital formation by allowing more time for individuals to acquire skills and resources before marriage, thus contributing to economic development in Western Europe (ibid.).

In contemporary times, polygamy is largely illegal in Europe and most of the Western world. This includes countries such as Canada, where the prohibition of polygamy is constitutionally valid and seen as sound social policy. Even in countries that formally recognize polygamy, legal prosecution may still occur. In contrast, polygamy is still accepted and practiced in some parts of the world, including certain African and Middle Eastern countries.

Brandon (2016) states, it is proposed that the selection of sexual strategies is influenced by personal, relationship, environmental, and cultural factors. The research suggests that in Westernized cultures, long-term pair bonds, which typically endure for around three to four years, are common and desirable. Furthermore, Brandon notes that short-term mating is a widespread occurrence across various cultures and historical periods, taking place both within and outside of long-term partnerships. This perspective provides a nuanced understanding of human sexual behaviour, acknowledging the role of polygamy alongside monogamy in shaping our mating strategies (ibid.).

From a cultural perspective, polygamy in Christianity has long been a subject of debate and scrutiny, with various perspectives emerging from different sects and geographical regions. The practice is generally not accepted within the Christian church, with monogamy being the standard form of marriage. However, there are exceptions, particularly in some African Christian communities, where polygamy has been conceptualized differently and is sometimes regarded as acceptable (Baloyi, 2013).

Rompis et al. (2020) explores the complex dynamics of polygamy within Christianity, emphasizing its historical, legal, and sociological aspects. Although Christianity fundamentally supports monogamy, the authors highlight biblical instances, particularly in the Old Testament, where polygamy was practiced. This context has sparked ongoing debates within Christian communities about its acceptability. The study also examines Indonesia's national laws, which permit polygamy under strict conditions, such as infertility or incurable illness, provided consent is obtained from existing spouses and fair treatment is guaranteed.

From a sociological perspective, factors like economic pressures, social influences, and personal issues such as infertility emerge as key drivers of polygamous practices. While some church communities maintain strict adherence to monogamy, others have at times accepted polygamous marriages due to social pressures or practical considerations, despite theological prohibitions. Through interviews and case studies, the research highlights the human experiences behind these practices, shedding light on the tensions between doctrinal teachings, legal allowances, and the personal realities faced

by individuals, and emphasizing the nuanced impact of polygamy within Christian societies.

While debates on polygamy within Christianity highlight diverse interpretations and practices across different cultures and regions, Calzolari's (2022) research shifts the focus to a broader cultural and legal perspective by examining how polygamy intersects with Western values and legal frameworks. In the study *Until Law Do Us Part*, Calzolari explores the attitudes of Italian Christians towards polygamy. The study highlights that polygamy is a contentious issue in Italy, largely viewed as harmful to women and children and commonly associated with non-Western cultures such as Islam and Mormonism. The research involved interviews with 22 Christian Italians, revealing a general consensus against polygamy due to its perceived threat to traditional family structures and societal stability. Some participants, however, suggested that if polygamy were more egalitarian, it might be more acceptable. The study concludes that while polygamy is criminalized in Italy, discussions around it reflect broader societal debates about cultural integration and the balance between individual freedoms and societal norms.

Guzel and Galieva (2021) examine polygamous marriages among Muslim men in Russia. These unions present a paradox, as they contradict Russian law while remaining permissible under Muslim religious canons. Historically, polygamous families were not a common aspect of the Muslim population in Russia, leading to the suggestion that the term "bigamy" might be more fitting (ibid., 533). The survey reveals that the majority of Muslim women hold negative attitudes towards polygamy, particularly those living in urban areas (ibid., 535). However, the authors note that most men tend to view polygamy favourably, and that some women express openness to becoming second or subsequent wives (ibid., 536).

A concerning trend has emerged in recent years with the rise of pseudo-Islamic practices that have led to the formation of secret marriages. In such instances, the Imam conducts nikah without meeting all the requirements of the rite, such as the presence of witnesses and parental consent. This leads to situations where underage girls claim to be older, marry, and even bear children, creating complex social and legal issues (ibid., 538).

Charsley and Liversage (2013) examine the evolving nature of polygamy among Muslim minorities in Europe, with a particular focus on Pakistani communities in Britain and Turkish communities in Denmark. The research highlights how migration and transnational living conditions create new opportunities and motivations for polygamous relationships. These are not merely continuations of traditional practices but are often new constructions that arise due to the specific conditions of living across borders.

The research explores the concept of dual marital aspirations, where young men in these communities balance familial expectations with personal desires, often maintaining relationships in both their country of origin and their country of residence. Polygamy is sometimes used as an alternative to divorce, especially in cases where maintaining family unity is prioritized. This can involve complex arrangements where one wife remains in the country of origin while another resides in the host country. The study emphasizes the role of legal pluralism, where the coexistence of civil and religious laws allows for polygamous marriages to occur in ways that might not be legally recognized by the state but are valid within religious contexts.

In this regard, polygamy demonstrates considerable complexity across cultural, religious, legal, and social dimensions. Although the subject remains highly contested, polygamy can be understood as a practice that is culturally embedded, religiously motivated, and personally negotiated. There are both subtle nuances of polygamy within a community of Christians and shifting paradigms of it among Muslim minorities in Europe. Polygamy challenges traditional marriage and family conceptions. It illustrates the tension between doctrinal teachings and the lived realities in which individuals must negotiate between different cultural frameworks. As societies continue to respond to this issue, polygamy remains a key point of discussion in debates on cultural integration, legal regulation, and the balance between individual freedoms and social norms.

## 1.2 Polygamy in Islam and Islamic societies

In the context of Muslim families, the practice of polygamy is guided by the Holy Quran, which allows a man to marry up to four wives simultaneously. In the Quran 4:3 it is said: „And if you fear that you will not deal justly with the orphan girls, then marry those that please you of [other] women, two or three or four. But if you fear that you will not be just, then [marry only] one or those your right hands possess [i.e., slaves]. That is more suitable that you may not incline [to injustice]."[1]

However, this permission comes with the explicit condition that a man must ensure equality and justice in the treatment and material provision of all his wives. This verse can be interpreted as favouring monogamy in situations where a man may not be capable of maintaining justice and equality among all his wives. Rehman (2007, 114-115) suggest that Quranic verses often used

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[1] https://quran.com/4/3?translations=17,19,20,22,84,18,21,95,85,101

to justify polygamy actually have highly restrictive conditions and aim to secure justice for female orphans. Over time, legal scholars have deviated from the Quranic spirit, leading to the erosion of women's rights in male-dominated Arab and Muslim societies (ibid.).

Rohmadi et al. (2022, 76) examine the deep historical roots of polygamy in human civilisation. The authors note that polygamy was a traditional practice even before Islam reached the Arabian Peninsula. This form of polygamy can be described as "infinite polygamy", in which there was no concept of justice among wives and husbands had unrestricted preference. However, classical texts suggest that the practice was also linked to one's status, with a free man allowed to marry four women, while a male slave could only marry two.

Polygamy is a complex and controversial topic in Islam, with different interpretations of the Quran and Hadith leading to a variety of practices among Muslim communities around the world. The Quran does permit polygamy, but under strict conditions. The husband must be able to provide for all wives equally, and he must treat them all fairly. Some scholars argue that the Quran's permission for polygamy was intended only for specific circumstances, such as war or famine, while others view it as a general permission that may be exercised more broadly.

Mahmood Mamdani examines the practice of polygamy within Islam in his book *Beyond Rights Talk and Culture Talk: Comparative Essays on the Politics of Rights and Culture* (2000). The book explores the historical development of polygamy within Islamic societies and examines the social and economic factors that have influenced its practice over time.

Mamdani's examination of Quran and Hadith interpretations concerning polygamy, together with various legal rulings, presents a nuanced understanding of the issue. He contends that polygamy is not an inherent part of Islam, but rather a practice shaped by specific historical and cultural contexts. This perspective aligns with the scholarly work of Asad (2016) and Irfan (2023). Irfan (2023) discusses how socio-cultural factors significantly influence the understanding and practice of polygamy among Persis women. The study highlights that while polygamy is religiously permissible, socio-cultural values and personal beliefs often lead to its rejection in practice, indicating that socio-cultural factors play a crucial role alongside religious doctrine.

In his book, Mamdani (2000) observes that polygamy was relatively uncommon in the early period of Islam and became more widespread in later centuries. Moreover, Mamdani argues that polygamy has often been utilized to justify the subjugation of women and maintain patriarchal social structures.

His viewpoint resonates with the argument presented by Tucker (2008), who discusses how polygamy can reinforce patriarchal norms and contribute to gender inequality within Muslim societies.

Not all perspectives on polygamous marriages are negative. Joseph Schacht, in his book *An Introduction to Islamic Law* (1983), provides valuable insights into understanding the historical and legal aspects of polygamy in Islam. He argues that in Arab communities, polygamy has historically been practiced, with proponents claiming that it provides social and economic benefits and serves as a solution to various societal issues. For example, the societal framework and cultural acceptance of polygamy may act as protective factors for children by providing them with more caregivers and a sense of belonging (Hamdan et al. 2009, 785).

Debra Majeed's work with a small minority of African American Muslims in polygamous marriages documents some co-wives' efforts to reframe multiple-wife marriage as a liberating rather than abusive structure (Majeed 2015, 86). This underscores that experiences within polygamous marriages depend significantly on socio-cultural context, particularly on whether such marriages are attributed positive value (ibid., 81).

Majeed's research also discusses polygamous marriages within Muslim immigrant communities in Europe, emphasizing that the acceptability of these marriages is influenced by cultural values and the specific needs and challenges faced by the individuals involved. For instance, the article presents a case study of a Pakistani couple where the husband married a second wife in Pakistan to fulfil his need for a caretaker, while his children stayed in the UK. Another case study involves a Turkish couple where the husband married a second wife in Turkey to have children while his first wife couldn't conceive. These marriages were influenced by norms and practices from their countries of origin and were shaped by the context of migration (ibid., 84).

Research by Ma'u (2023) and Santoso and Nasrudin (2021) explore polygamy among Indonesian civil servants, highlighting the legal framework and regulations. Courts may permit polygamy if a wife is unable to fulfil her duties due to disability or illness, provided that the husband secures the approval of his wife or wives and demonstrates financial capacity. For example, Ma'u (2023) presents polygamy as an Islamic option to address gender imbalances and issues such as sterility or misbehaviour. The practice is presented as offering benefits such as preventing social degradation and

spreading *da'wah²*, grounded in Quranic and Hadith teachings, with justice and time-sharing among wives identified as key requirements.

Rehman (2007) also notes that in Pakistan, prior to entering into a polygamous marriage, Muslim men are required to obtain written permission from the Arbitration Council. The petitioner is also required to inform the Council as to whether the consent or agreement of the existing wife or wives has been obtained (ibid., 116-117). However, many individuals practise polygamy secretly, bypassing state procedures (Ma'u 2023; Santoso and Nasrudin 2021).

### 1.2.1 Historical Development of Islamic Family Law in Jordan

Islamic law (Sharia) has played a foundational role in shaping the legal system of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, particularly in the area of family law. From the establishment of the modern Jordanian state, family-related legal matters—such as marriage, divorce, custody, and inheritance—have been regulated through a legal framework deeply rooted in Islamic jurisprudence. At the same time, Jordan represents a legal context in which Islamic legal principles have been selectively incorporated into a codified system designed to accommodate the requirements of a modern nation-state. As a result, Jordanian family law reflects an ongoing effort to reconcile religious legitimacy with contemporary regulatory and administrative frameworks governing family life.

Historically, Jordanian family law has been predominantly grounded in the Hanafi school of Sunni jurisprudence, which provided the principal legal reference for personal status matters across much of the region (Welchman, 2018). The Hanafi school's methodological reliance on juristic reasoning (ra'y) and discretionary preference (istiḥsān) has long been regarded as facilitating legal adaptability to local customs and changing social realities (Shehada 2009). Such methodological flexibility later informed broader processes of family law codification within modern legal systems, including Jordan's Personal Status Law.

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² Da'wah in Islam refers to the act of inviting or calling people to embrace the faith of Islam. It involves spreading the teachings of Islam, educating others about its principles, and encouraging both Muslims and non-Muslims to follow Islamic practices and beliefs. Da'wah is sometimes referred to as religious outreach, or more: missionary work, meant to relay the message of Islam through peaceful and informative ways.

The continued influence of Hanafi jurisprudence is evident in several key provisions of the Jordanian Personal Status Law. Notably, the PSL allows adult women to contract marriage without the consent of a guardian, a rule specific to the Hanafi doctrine and often cited as reflecting a comparatively flexible approach to marital autonomy within Islamic legal tradition (Welchman, 2018). At the same time, Jordanian lawmakers have not relied exclusively on Hanafi doctrine. As Welchman (2018) observes, legal reforms have selectively incorporated rulings from other Sunni schools in order to enhance legal coherence and social responsiveness. For example, the Shafiʿi emphasis on the explicit verbal formulation (ṣīgha) of marriage contracts has been integrated into Jordanian law, illustrating a pragmatic synthesis of doctrinal sources aimed at preserving Islamic authenticity while responding to administrative and social considerations (Alfroukh, Alhindawi 2023).

This selective incorporation of jurisprudential traditions highlights the broader historical trajectory of Jordanian family law as one of negotiation between classical Islamic authority and legal adaptability. While Hanafi jurisprudence provides a flexible doctrinal base, the codified system of the PSL demonstrates how Islamic legal principles have been reinterpreted and reformulated to align with shifting notions of justice, gender relations, and social order within the framework of the modern state (Welchman 2018).

The codification and subsequent amendments of the Personal Status Law constitute a central milestone in the development of Jordanian family law. As Cherland (2014) notes, the PSL represents a significant transition from largely customary and jurisprudential practices toward a unified legal code that seeks to remain faithful to Islamic principles while meeting contemporary legal standards. The law delineates the rights and obligations of family members in matters of marriage, divorce, custody, and inheritance, thereby structuring intimate relations through a formal legal framework.

Despite its codified nature, the PSL has been widely noted for its profound impact on women's lives, particularly through provisions that reinforce gendered hierarchies within the family. While the legal age of marriage is set at eighteen, judicial exceptions permit marriage from the age of fifteen, a practice that sustains the authority of male guardians over brides (Cherland 2014). Although women may theoretically insert stipulations into marriage contracts—such as restricting polygamy or preventing forced relocation—these options are infrequently exercised due to limited legal awareness and fear of social or familial repercussions. Similarly, provisions governing maintenance establish a framework in which wives' financial rights are closely tied to cohabitation and obedience, while husbands retain the

authority to withhold consent for women's employment, thereby affecting their entitlement to maintenance.

Polygamy remains legally permissible under Jordanian law, allowing men to marry up to four wives on the condition of equitable treatment. While formal requirements of fairness and accommodation are stipulated, critics have long argued that these provisions institutionalize gender inequality by normalizing women's placement within conventional domestic roles. Collectively, such legal norms illustrate how family law continues to regulate women's lives through assumptions about obedience, dependency, and marital hierarchy.

Efforts to reform Jordanian family law have sought to address some of these inequalities, though with limited substantive impact. The 2010 amendments to the PSL introduced procedural reforms, including increased judicial oversight of minor marriages and divorce registration, as well as the rebranding of *khul* [3] as *iftidā* [4], which enabled women to seek divorce without their husband's consent (UNFPA et al. 2018). While these changes were presented as steps toward enhancing women's legal protections, they largely preserved the underlying patriarchal structure of family law.

As Engelcke (2018) observes, polygamy remained admissible under the 2010 reforms, reflecting the continued influence of conservative interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence. The primary regulatory addition consisted of notification requirements, whereby a prospective second wife must be informed of a man's marital status prior to marriage, and the first wife notified after the marriage has taken place. Women's organizations, including the Jordanian Women's Union, advocated for stricter limitations, such as restricting polygamy to exceptional circumstances or granting first wives an automatic right to divorce and financial settlement. These proposals were ultimately rejected, as judicial authorities opposed measures perceived to infringe upon men's religiously sanctioned marital rights (Engelcke 2018).

Beyond formal legal provisions, scholars consistently highlight a significant gap between law and practice in Jordanian family law. Cultural resistance remains a major obstacle to the effective implementation of reforms, as deeply entrenched social norms continue to prioritize patriarchal family structures over gender equality (Al-Sharari & AlKhatib 2015). Legal

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[3] Khulʿ is a form of divorce in Islamic law initiated by a wife, in which she seeks dissolution of the marriage in exchange for compensation, usually by returning the dowry.
[4] Iftidāʾ refers more broadly to a woman redeeming herself from the marriage by offering compensation; in classical fiqh, *khul*ʿ is considered a specific legal form of *iftidāʾ*.

reforms are often perceived as threatening traditional social orders, leading to limited societal acceptance and uneven enforcement.

This disconnect between policy and lived reality is further compounded by institutional and economic constraints. Although the legal framework formally recognizes certain rights, many women experience little practical change in their daily lives due to inadequate enforcement mechanisms and persistent social pressures. As Moors (1999) argues, the relationship between legal texts and social practices in Jordan is dialectical: while the law establishes a framework for gender equality, its application is mediated by cultural expectations that discourage women from asserting their legal rights.

Similar patterns are evident in the continued practice of child marriage, which remains legally permissible through judicial approval when deemed to be in the minor's best interest. As Prettitore (2015) notes, the lack of clear criteria for assessing such interests has resulted in high approval rates, particularly for girls, driven by social stigma surrounding premarital relationships and economic hardship. Comparative examples, such as reforms to Morocco's Moudawana, further demonstrate that legal changes alone are insufficient to alter deeply rooted social practices.

Finally, broader socio-political resistance to family law reform persists, particularly among Islamist and conservative actors who view measures such as expanded divorce rights as threats to family cohesion and male authority (Muhtaseb, Brown & Kayyali 2016). While legal amendments have aimed to align Jordanian family law with international human rights norms, substantive transformation remains constrained by the enduring influence of religious authority, social norms, and economic realities.

In this sense, Jordan's family law reforms must be understood as part of a wider regional negotiation between Islamic legal traditions, colonial legacies, and contemporary state-building projects (Welchman 2018). The Jordanian Personal Status Law exemplifies this balancing act, simultaneously affirming Islamic legitimacy and engaging with modern legal discourses on rights and protections, while leaving many structural inequalities largely intact (Alfroukh, Alhindawi 2023; Prettitore 2015).

### 1.2.2 Legal Framework Governing Polygamy in Jordan

The legal regulation of polygamy in Jordan is shaped by the state's adherence to Islamic legal principles, particularly as codified in the Personal Status Code (hereafter PSC). Polygamy is permitted in Jordan, but only under strict conditions intended to ensure justice.

Jordan's Personal Status Law No. 15 of 2019 (National Legislative Bodies / National Authorities 2019) allows a man to marry more than one wife, provided that he can ensure equal treatment and financial support for all wives. The law requires the husband to demonstrate his ability to maintain fairness and provide for each wife adequately. The PSC document specifies that a husband must provide evidence of his financial capability to support multiple wives equally. This typically involves demonstrating sufficient income or assets to ensure that each wife receives fair and adequate support. The court may require documentation or proof of the husband's financial status to assess his ability to meet these obligations. The primary focus is on the husband's ability to provide financial support and equal treatment to all wives.

Sharia courts assess these requirements by examining a man's financial condition in relation to his ability to fulfil marital obligations. Judicial oversight is therefore presented as a protective mechanism aimed at safeguarding the welfare of women in polygamous marriages (Al-Sharari & AlKhatib 2014). Women have the right to negotiate the terms of their marriage contracts, which may include conditions restricting a husband from marrying additional wives. Such contractual rights are intended to empower women by allowing their preferences and concerns to be formally recognised within marriage.

Historically, Sharia courts played a central role in the interpretation and application of Islamic family law in Jordan, particularly in matters of personal status such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, and polygamy. Judges in Sharia courts exercise considerable discretion in their rulings, allowing decisions to respond to the circumstances of individual cases. This flexibility is often viewed as essential both for compliance with Islamic law and for accommodating the practical realities of modern life.

The family and personal laws, such as those pertaining to polygamy, are within the jurisdiction of religious courts, and their judgments are commonly based on traditional interpretations that are often detrimental to women. Although legislation formally promotes equality, its application often favours male advantage, with judges exercising broad discretion (Engelcke 2018).

Article 40 of the Jordanian Personal Status Law (National Legislative Bodies / National Authorities 2019) mandates that a man with multiple wives must treat them equitably and provide separate dwellings for each. Additionally, since a 2001 amendment, article 37 states that the courts are required to inform each wife of the existence of the others.

The law does not specify clear criteria for evaluating what constitutes "fair treatment" of wives. It normally obliges the husband to secure equal financial support and care. As a result, the interpretation and evaluation of fair

treatment remain ambiguous. How fair treatment is determined may depend on a judge's ruling and the specific facts of each case.

If a husband fails to provide fair treatment or maintenance as required by law, a wife may seek legal recourse. Such recourse includes lodging a complaint in court, making her eligible for several legal actions, such as divorce and claims for financial settlements. The court would intervene for the fulfilment of the husband's obligations or against any grievances that the wife may have because of the husband's noncompliance with the law.

In practice, this often requires presenting evidence such as financial records, witness testimony, or documentation of unequal treatment or neglect. For example, proving whether he provides different financial support or offers a different living condition could be tested. Time and attention given to the husband by the wife may also be assessed. The court would then look through the evidence to find whether the husband's actions really meant differential treatment.

If a husband fails to meet these obligations, the court can intervene. The court may take actions such as ordering the husband to fulfil his duties, adjusting financial support, or even granting a divorce to the wife if the situation warrants it. The court's decision will be based on the evidence presented and the specific circumstances of the case.

Al-Rabadi and Al-Rabadi (2018) highlight that Jordanian family law, particularly in the context of polygamy, lacks effective enforcement mechanisms to ensure fair treatment of wives. While the law requires a husband to treat all his wives equally, there are limited legal tools to hold him accountable if he fails to do so. The courts can recommend fair treatment, but without specific legal sanctions or enforcement mechanisms, these recommendations largely depend on the husband's willingness to comply. This means that women in polygamous marriages may not have effective legal protection if their husbands do not treat them fairly.

## 1.3 Social and Cultural Perspectives on Polygamy in Islam

A review of the literature shows that social and cultural perspectives on polygamy are highly diverse and complex. Understanding these perspectives is crucial to gaining a comprehensive view of polygamy's role and implications within different societal constructs. This section draws on a range of scholarly works focusing on polygamy within Islamic contexts. The focus is on social acceptance, challenges, and cultural interpretations within Islamic

communities, including how polygamy is perceived and practised, whether it is viewed positively or negatively, and its relevance in contemporary contexts.

Proponents of polygamy suggest that the practice can bring about various societal benefits. In their discussion of the historical context of Islam, Adnan et al. (2022) suggest that polygamy can be beneficial in situations involving high male mortality, divorce, infertility, or chronic illness among women. In this context, polygamy is presented as having served practical purposes related to marriage, sexual relations, and lineage. Polygamy provided a support structure for widows and orphans who would otherwise be left without any means of sustenance.

Scholars have highlighted the potential benefits of polygamy, attributing them to the imbalance in the number of men and women. This perspective is not limited to a specific historical period but spans from the early Islamic era—when many men died in wars—to the present day. Renner and Krieger (2022), and Yasin et al. (2013), consider demographic factors such as women outnumbering men and higher male mortality due to war and other life-risking activities. This imbalance can lead to a potential social crisis if every man marries only one woman. Yasin et al. (2013) delve into the population demographics of Malaysia in 2009, pointing out that women represented 49% of the population. The authors further discuss the role of polygamy in Islam as a potential means of providing support and protection for women who are widows, ill, or barren (ibid., 79).

In contemporary discussions, the perceived advantages of polygamy have expanded beyond safeguarding women and orphans to include arguments related to sexual needs and increased marriage opportunities. Quiroz (2016) observes that men often defend polygamy by claiming that they are more vulnerable to sexual temptations, with Islamic law imposing severe consequences for acts of adultery. Similarly, Rehman (2007) and Naseer et al. (2024) emphasize that polygamy can cater to the innate needs and desires of both men and women, offering a lawful structure for managing sexual relations.

Yasin et al. (2013) delves into the impact of menopause on women's sexual function and the potential implications for their husbands. It proposes that menopause may lead to a decrease in sexual desire and ability for women due to a drop in estrogen levels. On the other hand, it emphasizes the continued sexual potency of older men. The authors cite Muslim scholars who advocate for polygamy in such situations, underlining the moral and spiritual vulnerability of men and the potential consequences of resisting temptation (ibid. 80).

Johnson (2005) and Rohmandi et al. (2022) point out that polygamy is portrayed as a remedy for various social issues, providing a legitimate framework to curb prostitution and extramarital affairs. It helps address demographic disparities by offering marriage opportunities to aging single women and ensures financial and social security for widows and single mothers. When practiced in alignment with Islamic values, polygamy can foster a family environment that mitigates women's societal burdens and contributes to their well-being. Rohmandi et al. (2022) adds that proponents of polygamy argue that it can protect women by providing them with sexual satisfaction and offspring.

In Johnson's (2005) work, she critically examines the social interpretation of polygamy in Islam, arguing that it does not align with the original intent behind the practice. Johnson challenges the controversial argument that justifies polygamy based on men's higher sex drive. She criticises the idea that men should be granted special marital rights due to an overactive libido, as this perspective reduces women to mere "passive receptacles for men's sexual pleasure and release" (ibid., 569).

Johnson emphasises that the Quran's original intention in permitting polygamy was to ensure justice for orphan girls rather than to cater to male sexual desires. She also underscores that the Quran recognises sexual needs for pleasure in both men and women, not solely for procreation. Moreover, Johnson disputes the claim that men inherently possess a greater sex drive than women, noting that proponents of this view often argue that women, rather than men, are predominantly responsible for adultery (ibid., 570).

In this context, Yasin et al. (2013) argue that a large female population, particularly unmarried women, may be linked to social challenges such as prostitution, HIV/AIDS, adultery, and unplanned pregnancies. Polygamy is proposed as a potential remedy to address these complex issues thoughtfully and effectively. Johnson (2005) also mentions the possibility of prevention of adultery and prostitution. On a societal level, proponents argue that if polygamy were formally recognised, it could reduce the injustice faced by women in ambiguous or informal relationships. Within this argument, every woman would have access to a legally recognised husband and social security of rights, which is presented as reducing reliance on prostitution.

Naseer et al. (2021) present an alternative perspective on polygamous marriages. Within polygamous marriages, some women report a sense of acceptance and shared responsibility with their co-wives. They navigate through their daily existence, dividing household chores and emphasizing the importance of maintaining amicable relationships (ibid., 6). Although disagreements do occur, the authors describe them as occasional rather than

pervasive (ibid., 6). A central factor in their acceptance of this arrangement is their religious and cultural beliefs. These beliefs shape women's understanding of polygamy and support their acceptance of the marital arrangement.

Shaiful Bahari et al. (2021), Tabi et al. (2010), and Husain et al. (2019) also note that polygamy is often presented as a structure that reinforces familial support through the redistribution of responsibilities. For instance, when one wife is unwell or temporarily unable to fulfil her customary duties, other wives can assume responsibility for caregiving and child-rearing. Similarly, if a wife is engaged in professional work, her counterparts may oversee the care of her children, thereby contributing to the financial and logistical stability of the household. This arrangement also allows the physical and psychological demands of pregnancy to be distributed among multiple wives, minimizing the strain on a single individual. Additionally, children benefit from being part of a broader network of siblings, fostering companionship and promoting a nurturing and stimulating environment during their formative years. The relationships among co-wives are often characterized by a spirit of cooperation and mutual support, as they collectively manage household tasks and work towards maintaining a harmonious domestic atmosphere.

Women sharing responsibilities sounds like an idyll, but further research shows that such an idyll is rarely achieved in the family. The negative effects are primarily psychological. Wives often experience depression, stress, sadness, disappointment, and resentment upon learning of their husband's remarriage. Polygamy also leads to disharmony within extended families and strains relationships.

Irfan (2023) finds that most Persis women perceive polygamy negatively, viewing it as a practice that causes emotional harm to women rather than as a noble manifestation of Sunnah. This perspective is largely influenced by socio-cultural values which heavily impact individuals' choices within the Persis community.

Scholars associated with Persis, along with their followers, maintain the view that polygamy is religiously permissible. This position is upheld despite individual decisions to abstain from the practice due to prevailing social circumstances (ibid., 142). Even when certain practices are considered religiously virtuous, they may be avoided if they are associated with negative social consequences or community disapproval (ibid., 142).

Overall, debates on polygamy remain multifaceted and complex. While some perspectives emphasise the potential benefits of polygamy—such as shared familial responsibilities, financial stability, and extended support

networks for children—these are counterbalanced by significant psychological distress, particularly among co-wives. The negative perception of polygamy among Persis women underscores this emotional harm. Although Persis scholars continue to uphold the permissibility of polygamy, individual decisions to abstain from the practice are shaped by social circumstances, indicating shifting societal attitudes. Legal norms regulating polygamy are intended to minimise social imbalance and define the rights and responsibilities of spouses. However, individuals engaged in polygamous relationships often grapple with significant emotional challenges.

## 1.4 Emotional and Mental Health Dimensions of Women in Polygamous Marriages

Polygamous marriages have been widely discussed in sociocultural, religious, and feminist scholarship, particularly in relation to their impact on women's wellbeing. Women in such marriages often face significant challenges, including strained household resources and tensions between co-wives, which may result in emotional distress and family instability. This section examines research that explores the emotional and mental health implications of polygamy for women.

Studies by Shepard (2013, 47) and Al-Krenawi (2013) reveal a higher prevalence of mental health issues among women in polygamous marriages compared to those in monogamous unions. Research identifies several contributing factors to reduced wellbeing, including financial strain resulting from larger family structures and interpersonal tensions between co-wives. These pressures may contribute to family conflict and relational breakdown (Elbedour et al. 2002). The impact is often particularly severe for first wives, who frequently experience their husbands' subsequent marriages as emotionally distressing events (Hassouneh-Phillips 2001; Ozkan 2006). More broadly, polygamous marriages are situated within systems of gender inequality, in which women's financial security is closely tied to their marital roles (Bao 2008).

Tucker (2008) offers an analysis of the intersection of gender, family, and law within Islam, with particular attention to marriage and polygamy in Islamic jurisprudence. She situates polygamy within broader socio-cultural contexts shaped by gender norms and expectations. According to Tucker, the practice of polygamy reinforces traditional gender roles and contributes to the reproduction of patriarchal structures within Muslim societies. These

dynamics are reflected in women's positioning within marital relationships and the unequal power relations that emerge.

Tucker also introduces the concept of 'gendered space', highlighting how women's behaviour and mobility are regulated within polygamous marriages. She argues that social norms and legal frameworks surrounding polygamy frequently shape where women can go, how they may act, and the roles they are expected to fulfil. These constraints reinforce gender inequalities and contribute to ongoing psychological pressure on women.

Fatima Mernissi's *Beyond the Veil: Male–Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (1975) is a foundational work in feminist interpretations of Islam. In this book, Mernissi challenges patriarchal readings of Islamic texts and argues for a more egalitarian understanding of the faith. She critiques polygamy as a practice that she considers incompatible with the Quran's emphasis on justice and equality. Mernissi argues that polygamy is not an essential component of Islam, noting that the Quran permits it only under highly specific circumstances, such as war or social crisis. She further emphasises that the Quran requires equal treatment of all wives, both materially and emotionally, conditions that she views as extremely difficult to fulfil in practice. As a result, Mernissi concludes that polygamy is more likely to produce injustice and inequality than to uphold Quranic principles.

In *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (1991), Mernissi further critiques polygamy from a feminist perspective. She characterises polygamy as a form of gender discrimination that undermines women's rights and exposes them to heightened risks of poverty, domestic violence, and psychological trauma. Mernissi maintains that such outcomes contradict the Quran's message of human dignity and moral equality. Her work has been highly influential among feminist Muslim scholars and activists, challenging the notion that polygamy is an essential feature of Islam and opening space for alternative Quranic interpretations grounded in gender justice.

While polygamy is deeply embedded in cultural and religious traditions, it has also generated sustained debates about gender equality and individual rights. The practice is frequently associated with patriarchal family structures in which men hold greater authority. Within this context, women in polygamous marriages often face distinct emotional and psychological challenges, shaped not only by patriarchal norms but also by complex intra-family dynamics.

Nurmila (2009) offers a detailed examination of the lived realities of polygamous marriages in Indonesia, drawing on interviews, participant observation, and court records. She argues that women in such marriages are

neither wholly victimised nor fully empowered. Rather, they operate along a continuum, negotiating their positions and exercising agency in context-specific ways. Some women consent to their husbands taking an additional wife due to social or familial pressure, economic considerations, or compassion for another woman in a vulnerable situation. Others actively resist polygamy through legal action or by choosing to dissolve the marriage.

In recent years, academic research has increasingly focused on the psychological wellbeing of women in polygamous marriages. This growing attention reflects broader recognition of the distinct mental health challenges associated with such relationships. These challenges arise not only from social pressures but also from experiences that may involve emotional harm, coercion, or trauma.

A systematic review and meta-analysis by Shaiful Bahari et al. (2021), synthesising findings from 24 quantitative studies conducted primarily in Middle Eastern and other non-Western contexts, examined the psychological impact of polygamous marriage on women and children in comparison with monogamous family structures.

The analysis found that women in polygamous marriages were more than twice as likely to experience depression than women in monogamous marriages (OR = 2.25; 95% CI: 1.20–4.20). Beyond depression, polygamous wives exhibited significantly higher levels of psychological distress across multiple dimensions measured by the Symptom Checklist-90, including anxiety (MD = 0.49), hostility (MD = 0.49), interpersonal sensitivity (MD = 0.41), paranoia (MD = 0.36), psychoticism (MD = 0.42), and overall psychological distress as indicated by the Global Severity Index (MD = 0.44).

One of the studies included in the meta-analysis reported that 58.4% of polygamous wives exhibited low self-esteem, while 64.1% reported social withdrawal and feelings of loneliness. The meta-analysis also identified poorer family functioning in polygamous families compared to monogamous ones (MD = 0.34), which the authors associated with divided emotional attention and constrained economic resources.

With regard to children, the reviewed studies reported higher levels of psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and somatisation, as well as poorer academic performance and social adjustment among children from polygamous families. The authors emphasised that these outcomes varied across contexts and cautioned against uniform interpretations, underscoring the importance of culturally sensitive analysis.

Alhuzail's (2020) study of polygamy among Bedouin-Arab families in Israel identifies significant emotional and psychological challenges for children, particularly daughters. The study reports that daughters often

experience distress in response to their fathers' second marriages, which they associate with their mothers' perceived betrayal and humiliation. This emotional burden is frequently internalised, as children absorb both their mothers' suppressed emotions and broader social norms that discourage the open expression of pain.

The study identifies three primary coping patterns among adolescent girls: normative, rebellious, and combined. The normative pattern involves adherence to community expectations while emotions are managed privately. The rebellious pattern is characterised by open opposition to fathers' decisions, often shaped by exposure to alternative social norms. The combined pattern incorporates elements of both, enabling girls to navigate complex family environments. These findings illustrate the varied strategies through which children respond to polygamous family structures.

Pangkam's (2024) systematic review of polygamy and women's mental health highlights a range of psychological challenges experienced by women in polygamous marriages, including elevated levels of depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Competitive dynamics between co-wives, combined with unequal emotional and financial attention from husbands, contribute to feelings of jealousy and inadequacy. Social expectations that encourage emotional suppression further exacerbate psychological distress, increasing the risk of long-term emotional harm and isolation.

Economic hardship further intensifies mental health pressures, as many polygamous families struggle to meet the financial demands of multiple households. Women with fewer resources or lower status within the family are particularly vulnerable, as limited financial independence restricts their ability to seek support or exit distressing situations. These conditions also affect broader family dynamics, with children experiencing secondary impacts linked to maternal distress and increased household conflict.

Pangkam (2024) notes that addressing these challenges would require culturally sensitive approaches that take account of local norms and social structures. Suggested responses include mental health programmes that provide spaces for emotional expression without stigma, alongside educational initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality. The author also highlights the importance of women's economic empowerment through skills training and access to financial resources, as well as engagement with community and religious leaders in shaping social attitudes.

A quantitative cross-sectional study conducted in Diyarbakir, Turkey, by İbiloğlu et al. (2018) examined the psychological effects of polygamous marriage by comparing polygamous and monogamous households. The study included 104 polygamous husbands and 56 monogamous husbands and

assessed psychiatric symptoms using the Symptom Checklist-90-R (SCL-90-R).

The findings indicated that polygamous husbands scored significantly higher on the Global Severity Index (GSI; M = 0.76 vs. 0.58, p = 0.014), as well as on several subscales, including psychoticism (M = 0.53 vs. 0.33, p = 0.013), hostility (M = 0.82 vs. 0.62, p = 0.028), and phobic anxiety (M = 0.38 vs. 0.20, p = 0.005), compared to monogamous husbands (İbiloğlu et al. 2018, 986). Although 75% of polygamous husbands reported satisfaction with their marital arrangement, only 46.15% stated that they would choose to enter a polygamous marriage again if given the opportunity (ibid., 985). The authors conclude that polygamous marriage is associated with an elevated risk of psychiatric symptoms among family members, regardless of education level, socioeconomic status, or household composition, highlighting the complexity of polygamy as a phenomenon shaped by intersecting cultural, social, and economic factors.

Naseer et al. (2021) examine the lived experiences of polygamous women in Punjab, Pakistan, using a qualitative approach based on interviews with 11 women from different cities within the province. Many participants reported feelings of distress and fear upon discovering their husbands' secret marriages. Jealousy emerged as a common response, often contributing to strained marital relationships, reduced financial support, and emotional turmoil. First wives, in particular, frequently described experiences of unhappiness and loneliness, especially in the context of infertility or perceived neglect following the arrival of additional wives (ibid., 5).

Hassouneh-Phillips (2001) examines jealousy among wives in polygamous relationships, interpreting it as a natural expression of emotional attachment and a desire for exclusive affection from husbands. While jealousy is often viewed negatively, the author suggests that it may also reflect women's concern for their future security. However, its consequences may be either constructive or destructive, depending on factors such as religious education and internalised social norms.

Further research by Hassouneh-Phillips and Al-Krenawi et al. (2006) highlights the psychological distress experienced by wives following their husbands' remarriage, including depression, stress, and feelings of shame. Women often internalise responsibility for their husbands' decisions and suppress emotional responses in order to protect family reputation. Such distress may manifest in both physical symptoms and emotional instability.

Overall, the reviewed body of research points to significant psychological and emotional consequences of polygamy for women. Across studies, women in polygamous marriages report lower marital satisfaction and

higher levels of psychological distress compared to those in monogamous relationships. Common experiences include jealousy, fear, shame, and emotional strain, which frequently contribute to relational tension. These outcomes are shaped by the patriarchal organisation of polygamous family structures, as well as by economic pressures and competition among co-wives, adding further complexity to women's lived experiences.

# 2. INTERSECTING FEMINISMS: AGENCY, THEORY, AND ISLAMIC CONTEXTS

## 2.1 Islamic feminism

### 2.1.1 Emergence and Influence of Islamic Feminism

Islamic feminism is a multifaceted movement that has deep historical roots dating back to the late 19th century. Understanding Islamic feminist theory is essential for gaining a comprehensive insight into the nuanced intersection of gender dynamics and religious principles within Muslim societies. By exploring this theoretical framework, we can better comprehend the historical context and contemporary implications of practices such as polygamy and their impact on women's lives.

Feminism as a social movement has developed through several distinct "waves," each shaped by specific historical conditions and political priorities. While the wave framework is not without limitations, it remains a useful way to identify major shifts in feminist activism over time (Kang et al. 2017).

The First Wave, spanning from the mid-19th century until 1920, focused primarily on legal and political rights for women. Its central goals included women's suffrage, the abolition of coverture laws, and gaining access to education and employment. First-wave leaders such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony challenged the ideology of the "cult of true womanhood," which confined women to piety, purity, domesticity, and submission (ibid., 87–90).

The Second Wave, beginning in the 1960s and continuing into the late 20th century, expanded feminist concerns to include social, cultural, and economic inequalities. This wave addressed reproductive rights, workplace discrimination, sexuality, and the gendered division of labour in both public and private spheres. It also led to the formation of key organizations such as the National Organization for Women (NOW). However, second-wave feminism faced criticism for centring white, middle-class women, prompting

interventions from Black, Latina, Asian American, and working-class feminists who emphasized the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality (ibid., 92–96).

The Third Wave, emerging in the 1990s, sought to address the limitations of earlier feminist movements by emphasizing diversity, multiplicity, and intersectionality. Third-wave feminists rejected essentialist definitions of "womanhood" and highlighted the shifting and overlapping bases of oppression linked to race, class, gender identity, and sexuality. Rather than relying solely on identity-based politics, third-wave activism foregrounds coalitional approaches, recognizing both the need to build alliances across different communities and different forms of marginalization. Third-wave feminism is also shaped by queer, Black, transnational, and Global South feminist perspectives, contributing to a more fluid and expansive vision of feminist political engagement (ibid., 97–98).

The three waves of feminism as they are commonly defined in Western academia primarily occurred in the Western world, particularly in the United States and Europe. However, their influence has been global, and feminist movements have taken place all over the world, including in the Middle East.

Three critical periods of feminism could be identified in the Middle East based on Badran and Cooke's (in Shahin 2020, 29) classification of feminism in the Arab world:

*First*, the period of invisible feminism that emerged in Egypt from the beginning of the 1860s until the 1920s. Feminism at that time was based on a critique of social gender roles and, through literary works, highlighted societal prejudice against women. *Second*, the period of social activism from the 1920s to 1960s, that was characterised by the development of the organised, public feminist movements focused on recovering the rights of Muslim women. *The third* and the last is the period of resurgent feminism, starting in the 1970s and continuing until the present day.

Feminist movements in the Middle East were influenced not only by Western feminism but also by societal changes and evolving attitudes towards the practice and interpretation of Islam. Since the 19th century, three predominant attitudes toward Islam have emerged among Muslims (Ahmed, Jahan 2014, 3–4):

*Traditionalism* stands firmly against modernity and Western influences. Traditionalists maintain that the historical formulations of Islamic law are definitive and look to the golden age of Muslim civilization for inspiration and guidance. They see the classical era of Islam as the pinnacle of its cultural and religious development.

*Modernism* finds its origins in the works of influential figures such as Muhammad 'Abduh, Rashid Rida, and Syed Ameer 'Au. Modernists are open to integrating modern Western advancements with Islamic principles, provided they are in alignment with Islamic ethics. They advocate for the adaptation and reform of traditional Islamic law, asserting that such an evolution falls within the realm of *ijtihad*—meaning the process of making a legal decision by independent interpretation of the legal sources, the Quran and the Sunnah.

*Islamism* represents a modern trend that eschews Westernization while simultaneously promoting a resurgence of Islamic law and practice. Islamists typically adhere to a strict and often literal interpretation of Islam, which they believe to be mandated by divine will. They view their interpretation as the sole or definitive understanding of Islam, one that should govern both personal belief and societal organization. Islamists equate Islam with their own interpretation, perceiving any differing views as heresy.

The three waves of feminism that developed in the Middle East reflect the echoes of these distinct approaches to Islam—traditionalism, modernism, and Islamism.

Secular feminists in the Middle East typically advocate for women's rights and agency from a perspective that is often distinct from religious frameworks. These feminists draw upon a variety of discourses, including secular nationalist ideals, human rights principles, and sometimes Islamic modernist viewpoints, to promote equality for women in both public and private spheres (Badran 2005; Al-Ali 2000). Secular feminists engage with humanitarian and national dialogues, contrasting with those who draw directly from Quranic teachings as their point of reference (Badran 2011, Shahin 2020, 30).

Islamist feminists maintain that while Islamic teachings establish a hierarchical structure in family and societal roles, this hierarchy is not synonymous with the oppression of women. They contend that although men are positioned as leaders within the household, their leadership should not be despotic or unjust. According to Islamic feminist interpretations, women's roles are primarily focused on domestic responsibilities and nurturing children, aligning with what is perceived as an innate inclination. This perspective upholds the notion that such gender-specific roles are not inherently oppressive but are part of a divine order that honours the distinct qualities of men and women (Ahmed, Jahan 2014, 4).

Additionally, there's an approach called Muslim feminism, which posits that Islam was revealed in a patriarchal context. Proponents of this view interpret the Quran to suggest an ethical worldview that supports equality and

addresses specific problems of the time. They view scripture passages pertaining to women and patriarchal societal models as historically situated, aimed at that era's issues rather than being universally prescriptive (Ahmed, Jahan 2014, 4).

In my analysis of Muslim women in polygamous relationships, I find that adopting Muslim feminism as a theoretical framework proves to be more contextually appropriate than relying on secular feminism, owing to several significant scholarly considerations. Primary because of the cultural relevance.

Muslim feminism is deeply rooted in the cultural and religious contexts that shape the lives of Muslim women. It encompasses a broad range of feminist positions developed by Muslim women, including those that draw explicitly on Islamic theology. Within this broader framework, Islamic feminism employs Quranic interpretation and Islamic teachings as a foundation for advocating women's rights, making it particularly relevant for examining gender relations within Muslim societies.

Unlike secular feminist approaches, which may treat religion as external or oppositional to women's liberation, Islamic feminism offers an interpretive framework that integrates religious belief with feminist critique. This allows for an analysis of women's experiences that does not dismiss faith or spiritual commitment as incompatible with agency or gender equality.

The terms "Islamic feminism" and "Muslim feminism" began to circulate in academic discourse in the 1990s, within expanding scholarly engagement with questions of women and Islam (Ahmed & Jahan 2014, 1; Shahin 2020, 29). During this period, proponents of Islamic feminism increasingly referenced Quranic and Hadith-based arguments for gender justice, while simultaneously critiquing patriarchal interpretations of Islamic tradition. These scholars and activists rejected the instrumentalisation of religion to legitimise women's subordination and positioned their work as an internal, faith-based critique rather than a secular or external intervention (Shahin 2020).

"Islamic feminism" represents more than a feminist ideology emerging from Muslim societies; it actively interacts with Islamic doctrine by delving into scriptural texts and established traditions. This form of feminism, essentially "Islamic" in nature, is anchored in the Quranic principle of universal human equality and advocates for the practical application of this principle in daily life.

Islamic feminists assert that the principles of gender equality and social justice are deeply ingrained in the teachings of the Quran. They argue that Islam originally advocated for parity between men and women. However, they

contend that the patriarchal structures of society have influenced Muslim jurisprudence and daily customs, leading to a denial of the rights and equality for women that the Quran provides. These feminists believe that the Muslim community should be an inclusive space for both genders, rather than a domain where women are marginalized. The prevailing ideology often strips women of their fundamental rights and allows men to control all aspects of life, relegating women to subordinate roles and limiting their societal participation (Shahin 2020, 32; Hasan et al. 2022, Badran 2002).

The foundational approaches employed by Islamic feminists involve traditional Islamic methods such as *ijtihad* (the autonomous examination of religious texts) and *tafsir* (the exegesis of the Qur'an), combined with analytical tools from various disciplines including linguistics, history, literary criticism, sociology, and anthropology (Badran 2002).

Islamic feminism stands as a vital framework for examining the complex interplay between gender and faith within Muslim societies. By rooting its analysis in the cultural and theological contexts unique to Islam, it provides a nuanced perspective that bridges feminist ideals with religious principles. This approach is particularly valuable for understanding practices like polygamy, as it allows for a culturally sensitive exploration of women's experiences while simultaneously challenging patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts. This synthesis demonstrates that religion and feminism are not inherently at odds but can coalesce to foster a more inclusive and equitable society.


## 2.1.2 Misconceptions of Muslim Women and the Role of Islamic Feminism

In the Western context, feminist and women's movements are predominantly viewed as secular, often juxtaposed against organized religion. This positioning leads to the reproduction of oppressive codes and Islamophobia by white "universalist" feminism. These feminists subscribe to flawed perceptions about Muslim women, believing in erroneous images that do not reflect reality. The first assumption by secular feminists is that Islam is the primary source of women's oppression, suggesting that salvation can only come from secularizing their beliefs (Ahmed, Jahan 2014, 3).

Such a standpoint leads to a second narrative that portrays Muslim women as continuously victimized and in need of rescue from the oppressive clutches of men deemed to be fanatical. This view neglects to engage with Islamic thought and overlooks the opinions and voices of Muslim women

themselves, thus denying them agency and the possibility of being recognized as proactive individuals capable of self-representation (ibid.).

Compounding these misconceptions is a third belief disseminated among certain feminists, who argue that Muslim women cannot articulate a feminist discourse on their own. This stance denies the existence of Islamic feminism outright, ultimately playing into the hands of patriarchy by excluding some women from the conversation, thereby depriving them of their legitimate rights (Ibid.).

The prominent feminist, Omaima Abu Bakr argues that the concept of Islamic Feminism is not dismissed; it is contingent on one's definitions and the values they attribute to it:

> About the term "Islamic Feminism," it is true I did not reject it because it depends on what you put under the name, how you define and qualify it, and what are the ideas and notions you subscribe to under that name. It is true that the terms "feminism" and "gender" themselves are English and Western, but the ideas of egalitarianism, justice, equal rights, compassion, resistance to tyranny, activism…etc. are not a Western invention or a monopoly by the West. Especially the history of women in the Arab world in the 19th and 20th century shows their "feminist activism" and discussion of "gender" long before these terms came to the surface. (in Tønnessen 2014, 11)

Indeed, feminists in West Asia face the unique challenges. The feminists in this region grapple with reconciling their goals with Islamic ideology, which exerts a strong influence on both cultural norms and governmental policies (Shahin 2020, 28). This tension stands as one of the most significant obstacles in the feminist struggle for equality within these societies.

Al-Faruqi (1983) takes a different stance, positing that Islamic Feminism should recognize the mainstream women's movement's general mistrust of religion as an impediment to progress. In contrast, Muslim women consider the teachings of Islam as supportive and beneficial. Al-Faruqi maintains that the guidance found in the Qur'an and from the Prophet Muhammad represents the ideal that contemporary Muslim women strive to reach. According to al-Faruqi, the issues faced by women today are not rooted in Islam or its traditions but rather arise from foreign ideological interferences, ignorance, and the distortion of true Islamic teachings, along with exploitation by individuals within the society (Faruqi 1983, 138).

The emergence of restrictive and patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an can be attributed to a fundamental conceptual error. This error is rooted in the belief that differentiating treatment between women and men inherently

leads to inequality. However, a closer examination reveals that distinction in treatment does not necessarily equate to inequity or injustice. It is essential to discern that Islam, through its canonical texts, may prescribe distinct roles and responsibilities for women and men, reflective of their differing social, biological, and emotional constructs, without positioning one as superior to the other.

Asma Barlas explains:

> Such a view is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, not only is the confusion of differences with inequality a 'confusion of categories . . . too immoderate' to sustain, but it has also been criticised on practical grounds by many theorists, especially feminists. Thus, while feminists initially tended to theorise equality in terms of identical rights/treatment, many now admit that treating women and men alike in every situation can actually exacerbate inequalities. As such, the fact that the Qur'an treats men and women differently with respect to certain issues is not in itself proof of its anti-equality stance, especially since, secondly, the Qur'an does not link sex with gender; i.e. it does not teach a theory of gender inequality based on the idea of sexual differences. (Barlas 2001, 20)

In Islam, the allocation of distinct rights and duties to men and women is thoughtfully designed not merely to safeguard their individual well-being, but also to cater holistically to the welfare of society at large. This differentiation recognizes the unique strengths and contributions of each gender, weaving them together in a complementary fashion that serves the broader social good. The interplay of these roles forms a balanced tapestry that, when adhered to within the intended spirit of Islamic teachings, works to create a harmonious and prosperous community.

Al-Faruqi (1983, 138) posits that for feminism to thrive within an Islamic milieu, it must not exclusively champion the interests of women. Instead, Islamic principles advocate for the progression of women to occur alongside the broader advancement of all societal members. The well-being of the community as a whole is paramount, superseding that of any individual faction. Society is envisioned as an interconnected organism, with the health and prosperity of each part integral to that of the whole. Consequently, efforts to improve women's situations should be undertaken in harmony with initiatives to enhance the conditions affecting men and other societal groups.

Islam is much more than just a religion that involves worship and spiritual rituals. It has a deep and widespread impact on every aspect of a Muslim's life, including how they engage socially, make political decisions, conduct business, etc. For many Muslims, Islam acts as a unifying force,

giving them a strong collective identity and a sense of steadiness in a world that is constantly influenced by different cultural ideas. This sense of community and shared identity is incredibly important because it helps Muslims come together to solve the various issues they face today. As al-Faruqi (1983, 139) puts it:

> To fail to note this fact, or to fail to be fully appreciative of its importance for the average Muslim—whether male or female—would be to commit any movement advocating improvement of women's position in Islamic lands to certain failure. It is only through establishing that identity and stability that self-respect can be achieved and a more healthy climate for both Muslim men and Muslim women will emerge.

Any attempts to improve women's rights and status within Islamic communities must respect and understand the importance of Islam in everyday life and to suggest that Islam is the enemy and an obstacle of women's rights is bold and insensitive. Efforts that ignore this or fail to appreciate how deeply Islam is valued by Muslims are likely to be unsuccessful. By recognizing and reinforcing the role that Islam plays in providing identity and stability, there is a better chance of to understand the problems faced by women and, perhaps, to solve them more effectively.

## 2.1.3 Amina Wadud's Scholarly Contributions to Islamic Feminism and Gender Justice

Amina Wadud, an American Muslim theologian is renowned for her pioneering work that intersects Islamic scholarship and feminism. Her influential book *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (1999) challenges traditional interpretations of the Quran that have led to gender inequalities. Wadud's approaches to the Quran champion egalitarian readings that highlight spiritual equality. She emphasizes a feminist lens in her methodology, bringing innovative interpretations to Islamic texts and advocating for equal treatment of all genders within the faith's spiritual framework.

In her book Wadud points out that Islamic science, along with various other scientific fields, has been predominantly controlled by male figures. Wadud argues that despite a universal mandate in Islam for women to seek knowledge as an integral, even mandatory, part of Islam, women's ways of knowing were not significant in the establishment of the operating paradigms of Islamic thought and praxis.

Men's perceptions of the world, their interactions with women, and their own thoughts and creativity have not only shaped their personal understanding of Islam but have also influenced its definition for women. The male perspective has been assumed to be the standard, fundamental, and universally applicable experience in defining what it means to be Muslim. A closer look at these assumptions reveals a prevalent patriarchal bias (Wadud 2006, 96).

Over time, women's perspectives and understanding of Islamic holy texts were often dismissed as not aligning with accepted truths or orthodox beliefs while male interpretations of the Islamic holy texts were treated with reverence, almost as if they were sacred or divine (Wadud 2021, 3). Islamic feminist reformers' goal was to remind, that all interpreters, regardless of gender, are simply human beings endeavouring to comprehend and carry out divine instructions (ibid., 4).

However, according Wadud, when women assert themselves by contributing to the creation of knowledge, they may face criticism and be labelled as disbelievers, heretics, or even adversaries of Islam, which can undermine their recognition as fully human (Ibid., 4).

Wadud in her book *Inside the Gender Jihad. Women's Reform in Islam* (2006, 33) argues that Islam, in its essence, does not favour any gender. It bestows responsibilities and rights based on one's capabilities and ethical awareness rather than on gender distinctions. Therefore, dialogues emphasizing the equal capability of both women and men to act as moral entities not only affirm their similar potential but also confront any societal or interpretive prejudices that claim the contrary. For instance, both men and women are urged to cultivate their spirituality and ethical sensibility through their deeds, both in social and personal spheres, underlining the broad relevance of this concept.

According to Wadud (2006, 96), throughout history, Islamic law has often been shaped by patriarchal views that treat women as inferior and as objects rather than active participants in discussions of Sharia. Women are typically affected by these laws without having a say in their creation, as they are made by those who do not share women's experiences. This patriarchal influence extends into the realm of personal relationships, where the issue of polygamy is a case in point. In polygamous arrangements, women frequently face unique challenges and complexities. These relationships, often sanctioned by interpretations of Islamic law, can reflect and reinforce the power imbalances already present in society.

In *Qur'an and Women* (1999, 83), Wadud offers a critical examination of the conventional interpretations of the Qur'an's verse on polygamy. She

suggests that the original intent behind the allowance of polygamy was to care for widows and their children. To comprehend the verse in Surah al-Nisā' 4:3, Wadud investigates the contextual circumstances under which the polygamy directive was revealed. She points out that the preceding verse addresses the fair treatment of orphans, acknowledging the difficulties in achieving justice for them. The Qur'an then proposes a solution by allowing guardians to marry these orphaned wards. Muslim feminists criticize the narrow perspective of those who support polygamy, highlighting that their understanding of "justice" within this context is often limited to material aspects.

Wadud reinforces her argument about inequality by referencing another verse from the Quran. She considers the implications of verse 4:129, which states, "You are never able to be fair and just between women." (1999, 83). This verse leads Wadud to conclude that the Quran actually favours monogamy as the ideal marital structure. Wadud argues that achieving the Quranic vision of mutual support—symbolized by the comparison of spouses to garments for one another in verse 2:187—and the cultivation of love and mercy as mentioned in verse 30:21, becomes unfeasible when a husband-father has to divide his attention among multiple families.

Wadud continues to contend that the Quran's ideal of reciprocal support, as signified by the allegory where spouses are likened to each other's garments in Surah Al-Baqarah 2:187, along with the fostering of love and compassion as delineated in Surah Ar-Rum 30:21, cannot be genuinely realized when a husband and father is stretched across several households (1999, 83). The shared intimacy and unity that these verses advocate for are compromised in polygamous family structures due to the divided attention and resources.

In her book (1999, 84) on the topic of polygamy, Wadud also addresses and discredits three common justifications that supporters of polygamy often use.

Firstly, Wadud critiques the argument related to financial stability. Proponents suggest polygamy is justifiable for a man with sufficient resources to support multiple wives. However, Wadud identifies this stance as inherently gender-biased, assuming women to be financially dependent and incapable of self-support: "for one thing, it is no longer accepted that only men can work, do work, or are the most productive workers, in all circumstances" (1999, 84). Wadud points out that women today have equal opportunities to participate in society, not solely as consumers but also as contributors to the economy.

Secondly, she tackles the issue of infertility. Wadud argues that nowhere in the Quran is infertility cited as a valid reason for engaging in polygamy, "thus, consideration for the barren man and the barren woman should not

exclude either from the chance of marriage, nor from the care and upbringing of children" (ibid.). Instead, couples desiring children could consider adoption—a more viable and compassionate alternative that aligns with the ultimate marital goals of love and compassion. Hence, using infertility to legitimize polygamy is unjust and heavily gender-biased.

Lastly, Wadud examines the argument that polygamy accommodates the male desire for multiple sexual partners up to four wives: „Only after this fourth are the Qur'anic principles of self-constraint, modesty, and fidelity finally to be exercised" (ibid., 85). The reality, according to Wadud, is that the original context of the Quranic verses about polygamy was aimed at caring for orphans and widows amidst the social uncertainties of Arab societies, not indulging men's appetites.

From this analysis, it becomes clear that Wadud advocates for interpreting Quranic revelations with historical context in mind. Specifically regarding polygamy, Wadud views this practice as having been a protective measure designed for a particular group of women—widows and orphans—in a very specific historical context. However, she argues that in the contemporary Islamic society, where women have the autonomy and rights to self-care, the rationale for considering polygamy as a means of ensuring women's protection is no longer valid or necessary.

### 2.1.4 Scholarly Perspectives of Asma Barlas on Patriarchy and Gender Equality in Islam

Asma Barlas is a Pakistani-American scholar recognized for her critical analysis of patriarchy within Islamic texts and societies. Her key work is *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (2002) in which the author undertakes a historical evaluation of religious authority and knowledge to demonstrate how Muslims have historically projected inequality and patriarchal views onto the Quran.

Asma Barlas critically examines patriarchal interpretations of the Quran, challenging their role in sustaining male dominance. She advocates for an egalitarian Islamic epistemology that aligns with gender equality while preserving the faith's core principles. In her examination of the Quran, Barlas initiates a critical inquiry with two pivotal questions. She probes its text to determine whether it inherently embodies sexist principles and also whether it offers avenues for liberation. This study is rooted in her quest to discern if such a revered religious text could perpetuate gender inequality or instead facilitate a path toward freedom and egalitarianism (Barlas 2002, 1).

In her work, Barlas (2002, 13) explores how God is portrayed in Islamic texts, unveiling three core principles: divine unity, justice, and incomparability. Barlas embarks on a thoughtful examination of the Quran through her hermeneutical approach, anchoring her analysis in the concept of divine unity, or the Oneness of God, to support an interpretation that opposes patriarchal structures.

With the principle of divine unity, she highlights God's sole and undivided sovereignty: "God is absolute Sovereign and no one can partake in God's Sovereignty" (ibid.). According to this principle, the idea that men have dominion over women and children, or that men serve as intermediaries between women and God, fundamentally contradicts the core precepts of divine unity. Such theories not only falsely elevate males to a divine status by implying they hold sovereign power akin to God's, but also misrepresent their role in relation to God. Consequently, these theories should be considered theologically invalid.

Furthermore, when Barlas speaks of God's "incomparability," she refers to the absence of human-like characteristics in the divine nature, challenging any claims that God possesses a gender. The gender-specific language of Arabic used in the Quran does not imply that God is male or female; rather, as Barlas contends, it should be understood that "God is beyond sex/gender" (Barlas 2002, 21).

Barlas (ibid., 14) posits that at the heart of God's revelation lies a profound commitment to divine justice, affirming that God is incapable of *Ẓulm* [5], an infringement upon the rights of others. This principle suggests that, by nature, God is neither unjust nor misogynistic. Consequently, the Quran, as the expression of God's will, cannot endorse or perpetuate misogyny or injustice.

In this context, it may be argued that by teaching the precept of the inherent inferiority of women, which breeds misogyny, and by justifying women's subordination to men, patriarchies violate women's rights by denying them agency and dignity, principles that the Qur'ān says are intrinsic to human nature itself (ibid., 14).

The key takeaway from Barlas work (2002) is that any interpretation of Islamic texts that suggests male authority over women is in direct conflict with the concept of divine unity and the indivisible sovereignty and incomparability of God. By advocating that God transcends gender and embodies absolute justice, Barlas posits that it is antithetical to the nature of the Quran to condone misogyny and inequality.

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[5] Ẓulm is an Arabic term meaning injustice, oppression, or wrongdoing.

Barlas describes her approach to interpreting the Quran by utilizing the hermeneutic principles that the Quran itself recommends. She explains (2002, 14) that when she reads the Quran "as text," her goal is to understand the intended message from God essentially seeking the author's intent. Barlas believes that the text carries inherent meanings that are accessible to anyone using appropriate methods and asking pertinent questions. This perspective acknowledges that although individuals, regardless of gender, may have personal reasons to interpret differently, they can also engage with the text in similar ways to reveal its intrinsic messages.

The methodology for interpreting the Quran involves a comprehensive threefold approach aimed at uncovering its fundamental teachings through discerning the authorial intent, understanding the historical context of its revelation, and recontextualizing its messages to address contemporary issues (2002, 21-23):

Firstly, it is about delving into the text itself to reveal meanings intended by the author that are accessible universally with a sound interpretive process. Secondly, it includes examining the socio-historical conditions surrounding the emergence of the Quran, recognizing that the patriarchal frameworks often noted in religious communities likely evolved over time and are not intrinsic components of the religious revelations themselves, thus highlighting that many gender roles are socially constructed. Lastly, the approach entails applying the Quranic principles to today's world, an analytical endeavour that moves from present realities to historical insights and back, with the objective of distilling moral and social guidelines pertinent to current debates, especially those pertaining to the roles of women.

This triad of interpretive strategies seeks to strip away the layers of patriarchal interpretation historically imposed on the Quran, thereby revealing its core messages that inherently oppose traditional patriarchal structures. This interpretive effort goes beyond scholarly pursuit; it is a practical endeavour aiming for a systematic comprehension of Islam that can contribute to the lives of modern-day followers, particularly in advancing notions of gender equity and equality. Using her interpretive method, Barlas (2002, 25) concludes that the Quran promotes an egalitarian view, explicitly advocating for gender equality.

Barlas also criticises the common male interpretation of Quranic verse 4:3, which many see as condoning polygamy. Contrary to the prevalent understanding and practices, where courts sometimes permit polygamy based on a husband's claims of high sexual need, Barlas (2002, 152) contends that the verse in question is not about fulfilling sexual urges. Instead, she asserts that it should be viewed as imposing limitations on polygamy. According to

her, polygamy is allowed only under specific circumstances, such as ensuring justice for orphans, and is not meant as a means to cater to male sexual desires.

Like Wadud, Barlas also points out that polygamy in the Quran is mentioned only in the context of caring for orphans and that polygamy may be permitted only if the guardian of a woman feels they cannot do justice to their charge outside of marriage or the marriage will not lead to injustice towards the wife (ibid., 191). It is not presented as a general endorsement of the practice for other reasons.

In light of fairness between spouses, Barlas draws attention to two verses of the Qur'an. In particular, the sacred text articulates that even with the best of intentions, it is virtually impossible for men to maintain fairness among multiple wives. The relevant verse emphasizes this point, "You will never be able to maintain emotional justice between your wives—no matter how keen you are" (Quran 4:129[6]), indicating a significant disconnect between human aspiration and its achievement when it comes to equitable treatment in such marital arrangements.

This divine revelation stresses that emotional justice and equal treatment in a household with more than one wife are exceedingly difficult to sustain. Furthermore, the Quran sheds light on the depth of human emotions by stating, "Allah does not place two hearts in any person's chest" (Quran 33:4[7]). In other words, the inclination of the human heart does not support equal emotional investment in multiple romantic relationships simultaneously.

When we consider these verses collectively, a nuanced interpretation unfolds. The initial allowance of polygamy, often abstracted from a part of the verse—specifically the latter half of Quran 4:3—is intended to be understood within its full context. Thus, rather than endorsing the widespread practice of polygamy, the Quran seems to set forth a subtle case against it, guiding Muslims to reconsider the conditions under which polygamy was initially permitted. By placing emphasis on the fundamental principles of justice, fairness, and the limitations of human affection, the Quran effectively underscores the preferable nature of monogamy, where these ideals are more readily achievable.

Hence, Barlas agrees with Wadud that the Quran's stance on polygamy is not rooted in addressing economic hardships, a wife's inability to bear children, or accommodating the sexual desires of men. Barlas goes further claiming that in addressing polygamy the Quran prioritizes the welfare of orphaned girls, advocating for their fair and just treatment rather than

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[6] https://quran.com/an-nisa/129
[7] https://quran.com/33?startingVerse=4

addressing sexual desires. In such way polygamy is presented as a means to uphold social justice.

Barlas came to conclusion that the teachings of the Quran lead to the conclusion that believers should interpret the scriptures holistically, viewing them as discouraging generalized polygamy:

> Polygyny is not the Qur'ānic ideal; otherwise, its admonition to marry only once, its assertion that men cannot do justice between wives, and its reference to the oneness of the human heart would hold no meaning. (Barlas 2002, 192)

Barlas and Wadud assert that polygamy, as depicted in the Quran, is not a universal recommendation but a context-specific practice pertinent to a distinct historical period. They argue that this practice should be understood and interpreted within its precise historical confines and no longer aligns with contemporary societal norms. Moreover, the authors highlight that the Quran cautions against the impracticality of ensuring fairness among multiple wives, presenting this as further evidence that polygamy is an exceptional circumstance rather than a standard within Islamic family and marital structures.

Polygamy in Islamic societies often relies on a narrow reading of a Quranic verse, ignoring its historical context. Common justifications include a wife's infertility, illness, or a desire for more children, yet these reasons lack Islamic authority. Islamic feminists critique such practices as patriarchal, arguing they perpetuate male privilege and undermine women's rights and equality within the family.

In recent years, Muslim women in Indonesia have increasingly taken on roles as interpreters of religious texts, challenging traditional male-dominated authority structures as it puts in the research by Rinaldo (2014). This shift is exemplified by the work of organizations Rahima[8] and Fatayat[9], which empower women to engage critically with Islamic teachings allowing women to draw on both Islamic and feminist discourses to advocate for gender equality.

Women involved in religious education and outreach lead to a feminization of religious knowledge. They participate in public discussions, contribute to religious scholarship, and use their knowledge to advocate for

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[8] Rahima organizes trainings and workshops about Islam and gender equality for teachers and students in Muslim schools, fostering an environment where women can explore and assert their religious and social rights (Rinaldo 2014).

[9] Fatayat provides services for women in areas such as reproductive health and economic empowerment (Rinaldo 2014).

their rights within the Islamic framework, thereby redefining their roles in both their communities and broader society (ibid.).

To conclude, the ongoing reinterpretation of religious texts by women in Islamic societies highlights a nuanced form of agency. This agency is not solely about rejecting patriarchal interpretations; it also encompasses finding alternative ways to express oneself within existing frameworks. For instance, while some women may critique and reject traditional views on practices like polygamy, others might embrace these practices, finding ways to assert their agency within them. This can involve adapting practices to better align with their values or fully accepting religious norms as a conscious choice. In the next section, I will explore the diverse expressions of agency, examining how women navigate and negotiate their roles within religious and cultural contexts to empower themselves and their communities.

## 2.2 Redefining Agency in Religious Contexts

### 2.2.1 Complex Agency in Polygamy: Navigating Faith, Society, and Identity

The exploration of agency in polygamous relationships demands a departure from conventional Western perspectives, which often equate agency solely with resistance or autonomy. This discussion integrates a range of theoretical approaches to illuminate the nuanced and multifaceted ways women assert themselves within religious and social frameworks. Grounded in seminal works like Mahmood's *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005), which redefines agency as embedded in ethical practice rather than opposition, and Butler's concept of gender performativity, the analysis demonstrates that even within restrictive contexts, women exercise subtle forms of resistance and self-determination.

The perspectives of radical feminists, including Millett (1970) and Firestone (1970), add depth by critiquing broader patriarchal systems, while Mahmood (2005) and Avishai (2008) present alternative views that frame compliance and spiritual devotion as agentic acts. These ideas highlight how women manage to balance their personal freedom with their religious beliefs and the expectations of society. By looking at different viewpoints, the framework shows how women adapt, resist, and define themselves in these situations, offering a deeper understanding of how they find empowerment in polygamous and religious contexts.

From a Western viewpoint, where polygamy is often seen as an incomprehensible phenomenon, it is typically perceived as a form of subjugation; however, this interpretation fails to recognize the complex ways in which women navigate and assert themselves within these relationships.

Daly, a pioneering figure in radical feminist theology, articulated a powerful critique of Christianity and other monotheistic religions in her seminal work, *Beyond God the Father* (1973). Daly argued that these religious systems are deeply rooted in patriarchal structures, perpetuating a male-dominated view of divinity that inherently supports the subjugation of women. She claimed that the traditional image of God as a male figure not only legitimizes male authority but also ingrains a sense of male superiority in societal and religious norms.

Daly's critique was revolutionary, as she challenged the very foundations of Christian theology, urging women to break free from the confines of religious constructs that have historically marginalized them. She emphasized the need for women to reject the patriarchal imagery of God, suggesting that such images reinforce a hierarchical structure in which men are positioned above women both spiritually and socially.

Secular feminists, such as Hirsi Ali, advocate for a feminist approach that is independent of religious influence, arguing that religious doctrines often impose restrictions that may limit women's autonomy and agency. Hirsi Ali, known for her outspoken critique of Islam, contends that many religious practices and beliefs perpetuate gender inequality and limit women's rights and freedoms.

Radical feminism offers a powerful lens for examining the systemic inequalities ingrained in religious practices. By focusing on the foundational causes of gender inequality, this branch of feminism highlights the core structures and systems that uphold male supremacy and female subordination.

Radical feminists tackle the sources of gender inequality by confronting systems that sustain male authority. This critique is especially relevant to religious practices such as polygamy, which are often rooted in patriarchal traditions that favour men's interests over the well-being of women. In numerous Islamic communities, polygamy is maintained as a religious custom. Radical feminists contend that it bolsters male dominance and systemic gender disparities. Historically, interpretations of polygamy by Islamic scholars—who are predominantly male—have often mirrored and reinforced patriarchal values, thereby solidifying gender inequalities.

A fundamental principle of radical feminism is its critique of patriarchy as an omnipresent power structure that privileges men while oppressing women. This concept is eloquently expressed by Millett (1970) where she

asserts that patriarchy is entrenched in various societal frameworks, including religion, law, and culture.

Furthermore, radical feminists stress the crucial importance of women having control over their own bodies, especially regarding reproductive rights. In her book, Firestone (1970) argues that the control of women's reproductive capabilities is a primary mechanism through which patriarchy maintains its dominance, ensuring women's economic and social dependency on men.

Further, Hirsi Ali (2007) portrays how strict Islamic practices profoundly impacted her sense of agency and autonomy. She explains that religious doctrines meticulously dictated personal aspects of her life, such as her education, clothing choices, and social interactions, curtailing her ability to make independent decisions and pursue her own interests. Hirsi Ali (ibid.) also delves into the entrenched gender roles enforced by her community, which often relegated women to subordinate positions, thereby limiting their opportunities and reinforcing a pervasive sense of powerlessness. Through these experiences, she illustrates the significant constraints placed on her autonomy within a framework she viewed as restrictive.

Throughout history, the performance of gender has often been dictated by male-dominated societal norms, prescribing how women should enact their gender roles. Men have historically set the standards for these performances, reinforcing a patriarchal framework where women's roles are narrowly defined and controlled (de Beauvoir 1953; Millett 1970; Butler 1990).

Butler's influential work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) introduces the idea of gender performativity, which suggests that gender is not a fixed identity but rather a series of acts and performances repeated over time. This repetition creates the illusion of a stable gender identity, yet it is within these performative acts that the potential for resistance and agency lies. Butler argues that by slightly altering these performances, individuals can disrupt and challenge the conventional norms that define gender roles. This subtle deviation from expected performances is a form of resistance agency, enabling women to resist and subvert the patriarchal norms within their religious contexts.

Butler's framework suggests that resistance does not have to be a direct confrontation with power structures. Instead, it can be achieved through the nuanced and iterative performances that challenge the *status quo* from within, providing a more complex and layered understanding of agency. This aligns

with the concept of resistance agency[10], where even minor deviations in everyday practices can signify an act of resistance and a rearticulation of identity.

A study by Arthur (1998) reveals that in the conservative Holdeman Mennonite community, women navigate the stringent social controls imposed upon them with subtle acts of resistance that highlight their agency. Through minute deviations in dress codes, these women challenge patriarchal norms, using clothing as a symbolic tool to express individuality and defy conformity. This collective yet discreet rebellion fosters a sense of solidarity among the women, allowing them to balance the community's expectations with their desire for personal expression. Their actions reflect a nuanced negotiation of power dynamics, where even within a tightly controlled environment, they find ways to assert their autonomy, thus illustrating the complex interplay of compliance and resistance in their daily lives.

Weitz (2001) examines how women use their hair as a dynamic tool to negotiate power, employing both resistance and accommodation to societal norms. Women adopt dual strategies, where traditional approaches align with mainstream beauty ideals, while nontraditional choices challenge these norms, such as opting for short or natural hairstyles. This creates a complex interplay where resistance and accommodation coexist, allowing women to navigate cultural expectations and social structures effectively. Although these strategies are often constrained by prevailing social norms, they hold the potential to challenge and transform dominant ideologies, ultimately contributing to social change.

Afshar's (2008) research examines the personal and political dimensions of wearing the hijab. She argues that for many Muslim women, the hijab constitutes a deliberate choice that reflects personal agency and autonomy, challenging dominant representations of veiling as a marker of oppression. In this context, the hijab functions as a symbol of identity through which women articulate belonging and self-definition within Muslim communities, while simultaneously contesting reductive social stereotypes.

Afshar's work critiques entrenched Orientalist and Islamophobic narratives that portray hijab-wearing women as passive and lacking agency. She highlights how such representations obscure the diversity and complexity of Muslim women's identities. Afshar stresses the importance of recognising

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[10] Resistance agency refers to the capacity of individuals or groups to act independently and make their own choices, often in opposition to oppressive systems.

this diversity and calls attention to the social consequences of Islamophobic discourse, which continues to shape public perceptions and experiences of discrimination.

Afshar situates the analysis within an inclusive and intersectional feminist framework that recognises women's choices—such as wearing the hijab—as expressions of agency rather than as mere outcomes of patriarchal coercion. This perspective challenges feminist approaches that position religion as inherently incompatible with women's rights, instead recognising religious expression as a meaningful dimension of many women's identities and autonomy.

Zimmerman's (2015) study, explores how young Arab Muslim women in the U.S. and France express their agency through the choice of wearing the hijab. It highlights that wearing the hijab is often a personal and religious choice, reflecting women's autonomy and spiritual journeys. The study emphasizes intersectionality, considering gender, religion, ethnicity, and the politicization of the hijab to understand these women's complex identities. It shows how they balance resisting Western stereotypes with adhering to cultural expectations, using the hijab as resistance against objectifying norms. Additionally, Zimmerman suggests that policies like France's hijab ban may not reflect Muslim women's experiences, who often see the hijab as empowering rather than oppressive.

Both studies highlight how young Arab Muslim women use the hijab as a means of empowerment and agency. By choosing to wear the hijab, these women assert their autonomy and challenge Western stereotypes that view it as oppressive. The hijab serves as a tool for resisting objectifying norms and expressing their religious and cultural identities. This choice reflects their ability to navigate and negotiate societal expectations, demonstrating resilience and strength in shaping their own narratives.

A study by Giorgi (2016) highlights that women's roles in religion are varied and complex, and their empowerment is not just due to secularization. Agency, which means having the ability to act and speak up, can be understood within different power dynamics and political systems. The study suggests that women's rights and freedom grow not only through secularization but also through religious feminisms and feminist theologies. This shows that women can have agency even in religious settings, using their voices and actions to challenge norms and redefine their roles in both political and religious areas.

Bracke's (2008) study is empirically grounded in ethnographic research among Christian and Muslim women in the Netherlands and illustrates how religious women navigate their identities within contemporary social contexts. For example, young women from the Islamic movement Milli Görüş within

the Turkish diaspora express dissatisfaction with forms of religiosity that confine faith to isolated practices. Instead, they seek a more integrated approach that aligns religious commitment with everyday life and broader social participation. Bracke conceptualises this orientation as a form of "pious modern" identity.

Drawing on these empirical findings, Bracke challenges feminist frameworks that conceptualise agency primarily in terms of resistance to norms. She argues for a broader understanding of agency that accounts for how women inhabit, negotiate, and aspire to religious norms. From this perspective, agency is best understood within the ethical and religious traditions that shape women's motivations, rather than through secular analytical frameworks that may misinterpret religious forms of selfhood and commitment.

## 2.2.2 Expanding Boundaries of Agency: Ethical Practice, Piety, and Self-Cultivation

In her seminal work *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005), Mahmood explores a nuanced understanding of agency that transcends traditional Western notions. She explores how agency can be viewed through the lens of ethical practice and even piety, particularly for Muslim women. Practices such as veiling are not merely acts of submission or resistance; rather, they are deeply rooted in personal choice and spiritual pursuit. This perspective challenges the Western idea that agency must always involve resistance to domination. Vintges (2012) adds that the idea that agency must always manifest as resistance, particularly in the context of Western feminist thought, can indeed be seen as a form of cultural imperialism. Mahmood instead presents agency as a process of self-cultivation within one's cultural and religious framework. This involves actively engaging in practices that align with one's beliefs and values, offering empowerment and fulfilment in their own right. Agency is also relational and context-dependent, shaped by cultural, religious, and social contexts. It is not solely about individual autonomy but involves navigating and negotiating within these frameworks.

Research by Bilge (2010) critically examines dominant interpretative frameworks that depict the Muslim veil either as a symbol of women's subordination or as an act of resistance to Western dominance. She argues for a more nuanced understanding of agency that moves beyond such binary readings.

Bilge suggests that adherence to religious and cultural norms may also constitute a form of agency, particularly when agency is understood outside liberal frameworks that equate it solely with resistance or transgression. This perspective aligns with Mahmood's conceptualisation of agency as embedded within ethical, cultural, and religious traditions. Mahmood demonstrates that women's engagement in religious practices can reflect intentional self-cultivation, discipline, and moral aspiration, rather than passive obedience or coercion.

From this perspective, religious practices are not just mechanical routines. Instead, they become ways through which individuals actively shape their moral selves and find meaning in their traditions. This broadens the understanding of agency, showing that it can also emerge through commitment, piety, and personal moral development, not only through resisting dominant norms.

Mahmood in her study (2006) delves into the women's Mosque Movement, a pivotal aspect of the broader Islamic Revival. This movement highlights how women are deeply engaging with Islamic teachings and practices, which are often perceived as reinforcing traditional gender roles.

The women's mosque movement in Egypt is characterized by women teaching each other Islamic scriptures and practices, challenging the historically male-dominated sphere of Islamic pedagogy. Mahmood conducted two years of fieldwork with this movement, focusing on how women cultivate piety and religious virtues. This movement has influenced various aspects of social life, including dress codes, entertainment, and public debates, aligning them with Islamic piety.

The movement is seen as part of a larger ethical project, where women cultivate virtues like modesty and piety, which are central to their religious identity and practice. This illustrates Mahmood's argument for a nuanced understanding of agency that transcends mere resistance to male authority. She suggests that the women's mosque movement embodies a form of agency rooted in religious practice and cultural norms, rather than being solely defined by oppositional acts against patriarchy.

Avishai's article (2008), explores the complex nature of agency among women involved in conservative religious practices. It resonates with Mahmood's critique of the traditional view that agency is merely about resisting oppression or escaping traditional roles.

A key idea in the article is the concept of complex agency, which extends beyond defiance against patriarchal structures to include how women navigate and negotiate their roles within religious frameworks. This perspective allows women to find empowerment and fulfilment through

adherence to religious norms, showing that agency can exist within conformity. It highlights religious engagement as a form of agency, where women actively participate in religious practices, finding personal and spiritual empowerment. This participation involves dynamic engagement and interpretation of teachings, underscoring the active role women play in their spiritual lives.

As we can already see, to gain a deeper understanding of agency, it is essential to move beyond the Western perspective that often equates agency solely with autonomy and visible resistance, and to recognize that agency can manifest in diverse, culturally and religiously informed ways. The research by Dunne et al (2020) challenges Western stereotypes that portray Muslim women as lacking agency and reiterates previously discussed concepts, emphasizing that personal agency can coexist within the framework of nurturing Islamic values and devotion to God.

The study highlights that Muslim women perceive their religious agency as an active engagement with their faith, involving the cultivation of Islamic virtues such as patience and modesty. This process is not passive; rather, it requires significant personal effort and decision-making. Dunne et al (2020) states that women actively shape their identities and actions in alignment with their religious beliefs, viewing submission to God as a form of agency. This challenges Western notions of agency, which often equate it with autonomy and visible resistance, by showing that agency can also manifest through adherence to religious norms and values.

Exploring the concept of agency among women in religious contexts, particularly within polygamous marriages, a study by Majeed (2015) of African American Muslims explores a nuanced landscape where personal, communal, and religious identities intersect. Majeed argues that while traditional structures may place men in dominant positions, women are far from passive participants. For instance, the dynamics of Black masculinity and femininity in these marriages reveal that women play a crucial role in shaping family decisions, demonstrate their agency and influence. Majeed adds that women's struggles with identity in polygamous marriages also underscore their agency. Through strategic negotiations of power, they influence family dynamics and assert roles that extend beyond traditional confines. This journey of self-determination is a testament to their capacity to navigate and redefine their circumstances, advocating for gender justice while honouring their religious and cultural identities.

Another study by Rao (2015) reveals what could be called a compliance agency. Rao explores how Muslim women in an American mosque express and understand agency through religious practices that shape gendered

identities. The concept of "self-sacrificing femininity" among Muslim women in the context of the study is about embracing religious obligations, such as veiling and accepting polygamy, as acts of sacrifice that contribute to a morally distinct religious order. This femininity is characterized by the willingness to sacrifice personal desires and comfort for religious devotion and community expectations.

Women's agency is expressed through navigating these religious expectations and asserting their identities within the framework of their faith. They engage in self-reflection and personal decision-making to align their actions with their beliefs, often redefining their roles within polygamous marriages. This involves balancing religious obligations with personal autonomy, forming support networks. For example, as Rao (2015) writes, women form support networks through alliances with others in similar situations, providing emotional support and practical advice. These networks empower them to challenge oppressive aspects of polygamy and advocate for their rights, sharing experiences and strategies to reinforce their agency and resilience.

Sehlikoglu (2018) goes further and argues that women's agency extends beyond resistance or compliance, encompassing a range of actions and decisions in response to their circumstances. It is multifaceted, involving negotiation and adaptation within social structures like family and community. Sehlikoglu writes that women creatively assert their desires, finding ways to express individuality and achieve goals within societal constraints.

For example, Sehlikoglu discusses how some religious women creatively integrate their spiritual beliefs into everyday activities, such as exercise (ibid.). These women view exercise not just as a physical activity but as a means to earn spiritual rewards. By attributing spiritual significance to mundane actions, they demonstrate their ability to navigate and harmonize their religious and cultural contexts. This reinterpretation allows them to align daily practices with their spiritual values, exercising agency in a way that is both personally meaningful and fulfilling within their faith.

Understanding agency within the context of polygamy, veiling or other religious practices requires us to look beyond the traditional view that these practices inherently subordinate women. Instead, we should focus on how women assert their agency—how they make choices and exert influence—within these frameworks. This perspective challenges the Western notion that agency must always be about resistance, highlighting instead the diverse ways women negotiate, adapt, and cultivate their identities and roles. By doing so, they find empowerment and fulfilment within their cultural and religious contexts. This broader understanding of agency respects the diversity of

women's experiences and underscores their resilience and capacity to shape their own narratives, advocating for gender justice while honouring their cultural and religious identities.

The present study draws on multiple theoretical approaches in order to examine women's agency in ambiguous and normatively saturated religious contexts. Each framework offers a distinct analytical perspective that helps to illuminate how women in Islamic settings construct, experience, and reflect upon their possibilities for action.

Islamic feminism, represented by scholars such as Wadud (1999) and Barlas (2002), advances a hermeneutic and theological understanding of agency grounded in reinterpretation and the critique of patriarchal religious exegesis. This approach conceptualizes women as active religious subjects entitled to moral authority within Islam. However, Islamic feminist theory often remains normatively oriented, implicitly assuming that agency manifests primarily through textual critique, reform, or reinterpretation. As a result, it offers limited analytical tools for understanding situations in which women do not seek to reform or reject norms but instead choose to act within them while maintaining religious commitment.

This analytical gap is addressed by Mahmood (2005), who reorients the concept of agency away from resistance and toward the capacity to act through normative commitment. Based on her ethnographic study of the Egyptian piety movement, agency is understood as emerging through moral reflection, disciplined conduct, emotional labour, and ethical coherence rather than through external forms of emancipation. Mahmood's framework makes it possible to analyse women's subjectivity without measuring it against liberal notions of freedom, instead situating agency within everyday religious moral practice.

Butler's (1990, 1997) work functions in this study as an analytical context rather than a primary explanatory framework. Her theory of performativity helps to clarify how norms are internalized, repeated, and embodied in the constitution of the subject. Butler's insights demonstrate that action never occurs outside norms but rather takes place within them, through repetition, reinterpretation, and embodied practice. In this way, Butler's framework helps to identify the conditions under which the forms of "quiet" agency described by Mahmood become possible, while also situating Islamic feminist discourse within broader dynamics of normativity and power.

Nevertheless, while Islamic feminism as well as the approaches of Mahmood and Butler significantly enrich the analysis, they do not fully address a broader sociological question: how reflexive action operates in relation to structural constraints when norms are not only internal or moral but

also institutionalized through law, family structures, community expectations, and social regulation.

For this reason, the next section introduces Margaret Archer's theoretical perspective, which conceptualizes agency as reflexive action within social structures rather than as their rejection or transcendence. Archer's approach makes it possible to analytically connect the two empirical dimensions of this study—the virtual space, where agency is primarily articulated narratively, and the Jordanian social field, where agency more often manifests through adaptation, moral reflection, and negotiated compliance—within a single framework that understands agency as emerging through ongoing reflexive positioning in relation to social constraints.

## 2.2.3 Agency Between Structure and Reflexivity: the Sociological Perspective of Margaret Archer

Margaret Archer is a social theorist whose work focuses on the relationship between structure and agency in social life. Her theoretical approach addresses the question of how social action becomes possible under conditions in which individual experiences and actions are clearly shaped by social and cultural structures.

Archer proposes an analytical framework that allows agency to be examined without reducing it to the effects of structures, while also avoiding the assumption that action exists independently of structural conditions. The author conceptualizes social reality as composed of analytically distinct but interacting levels, and therefore argues for the separation of social structures and acting subjects in order to examine their relationship rather than conflating them.

In her later work, Archer develops the concept of reflexive agency, in which action is understood as a process grounded in internal deliberation, personal concerns, and goals. This perspective makes it possible to conceptualize agency not as full autonomy from social conditions, but as action within circumstances that constrain without fully determining individual conduct.

In this study, Archer's theory is employed to provide a conceptual grounding for the possibility of agency in normatively and institutionally structured contexts. Her approach allows for an analysis of how action becomes possible even when social order is strongly defined by legal, cultural, or communal norms.

In *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach* (1995), Archer explicitly addresses the problem of how agency can be conceptualized in a world that is already socially structured. She challenges approaches that either reduce human action to the effects of social structures or, conversely, treat society as merely the outcome of individual choices. Instead, Archer argues that social life is characterized by the simultaneous presence of constraint and freedom: "We are simultaneously free and constrained and we also have some awareness of it" (1995, 2). From this perspective, social structures—such as laws, institutional rules, social expectations, and power relations—shape the conditions under which people act, influencing what is easy or difficult to do and what consequences different choices may entail. However, these conditions do not eliminate agency. Even in constrained situations, individuals make decisions, although these decisions may be unequal, costly, or limited in scope.

For Archer, agency does not require action outside social structures; rather, it emerges through decision-making within them. It is precisely this process of deliberation and choice under structured conditions that makes it possible to speak of agency in social life.

In her later work, Archer further refines the concept of agency by clearly distinguishing it from external outcomes such as social change, resistance, or emancipation. In *The Reflexive Imperative in Late Modernity* (2012), she argues that agency should not be assessed by whether an individual succeeds in transforming social structures or opposing dominant norms. Nor should agency be equated with emancipation as defined by external normative standards. Instead, Archer conceptualizes agency as an internal reflexive process, which she calls "internal conversation.*"* Through this process, individuals evaluate their social situation, relate it to their personal concerns, and deliberate about possible courses of action. Crucially, this deliberation may lead to choices that involve adaptation, compromise, or even the reproduction of existing norms, without thereby negating agency.

From this perspective, agency is present when individuals reflexively consider their circumstances, compare available alternatives—even when these alternatives are limited or undesirable—and consciously choose a direction of action. As Archer emphasizes, constraints and enablements are not entities in themselves; they only operate in relation to agential projects as subjectively defined (Archer 2012, 55). This means that agency must be evaluated in relation to the actor's own projects and concerns, rather than according to externally imposed ideals of resistance or liberation. This understanding is particularly relevant for the present study, as it allows women's actions to be analysed as agential when they are grounded in

reflexive moral, religious, or familial projects, even when those actions align with or sustain existing normative frameworks. While this study adopts a broad understanding of agency, it is equally important to clarify what cannot be considered agency within the applied theoretical frameworks. This distinction is particularly relevant in normatively dense contexts, where action may occur without reflexive orientation or deliberative choice.

In Archer's framework, a key form of non-agential action is what she calls "fractured reflexivity" (2012, 249). Fractured reflexivity describes situations in which internal reflection is present but fails to perform an agential function. Individuals may engage in self-talk or emotional reflection, yet this process does not provide orientation toward action or answer the question of "what is to be done." As a result, reflection remains primarily expressive rather than deliberative, intensifying emotional distress rather than guiding purposeful action.

Archer emphasizes that in such cases, internal conversations do not lead to coherent courses of action but instead result in disorientation, paralysis, or reactive behaviour. Agency is therefore significantly weakened or temporarily absent, even though individuals may continue to act in everyday life. As she notes, fractured reflexivity is characterized by an absence or lack in the reflexive internal conversation such that it "supplies the subject with no orientation towards the question 'what is to be done'" and remains largely expressive rather than action-guiding (Archer 2012, 251).

This distinction is analytically important for the present study, as it allows for differentiation between reflexive adaptation, which constitutes agency, and situations of emotional disorientation or paralysis, which do not. Not all expressions of emotion, distress, or support-seeking should therefore be interpreted as agential action. This perception also helps clarify differences across the theoretical approaches employed in this study. In Islamic feminist scholarship, agency is not attributed to actions that lack hermeneutical or ethical authorship and are sustained through patriarchal religious authority rather than conscious moral reasoning. In this sense, not all forms of religious compliance are automatically agential.

Mahmood's work, by contrast, demonstrates that agency can exist within discipline and obedience, provided that such practices are undertaken as conscious ethical self-formation. From this perspective, agency is absent where compliance is not experienced as a deliberate moral project but as unreflective submission. Butler's theory of performativity further supports this distinction by showing that the mechanical repetition of norms without reflexive engagement or subjective positioning cannot be understood as

agency. Actions experienced as inevitable or naturalized, rather than chosen, fall outside the scope of agential conduct.

Archer's framework integrates these insights by providing a sociological criterion for agency: reflexive deliberation oriented toward action in relation to subjectively defined personal concerns. Where internal reflection fails to generate orientation or choice, agency cannot be analytically sustained.

# 3. MUSLIM WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF POLYGAMY: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

## 3.1 Women's Facebook Group Discussions on Polygamy: a Virtual Ethnography Study

### 3.1.1 Women's Perception of Polygamy Through Personal Experiences

Online platforms increasingly serve as spaces where individuals discuss sensitive and socially complex issues, including marital practices such as polygamy. This section examines a closed, women-only Facebook group that brings together Muslim women who are living in, or have lived in, polygamous marriages, as well as women interested in polygamy as a marital practice. The group serves as a private online space where participants share personal experiences, exchange advice, and discuss the religious, emotional, and social dimensions of polygamous relationships.

Within group discussions, women describe their experiences in diverse and sometimes contrasting ways, reflecting different personal, relational, and religious positions. Analysing these narratives provides insight into how women understand, manage, and give meaning to their lives within polygamous relationships. The Facebook group thus functions not only as a support network, but also as a space where women collectively negotiate interpretations of polygamy and their roles within it.

As stated in the group's introduction, the community is intended as a space for sharing diverse perspectives, experiences, and roles related to polygamous practices:

> "This group was established to support women who are either currently in polygamous marriages and seek assistance, are aiding their husbands in finding additional wives, or are contemplating becoming a second, third, or fourth wife, in alignment with their belief in this beautiful Sunnah."

The notion "polygamy is Sunnah" is related to Islamic beliefs and practices. In Islam, the Sunnah refers to the teachings, practices, and examples set by the Prophet Muhammad during his lifetime. When someone says "polygamy is Sunnah," they mean that polygamy is a practice that was followed by the Prophet Muhammad and is therefore considered an acceptable and/or recommended practice within Islam.

While Islam allows polygamy, it is crucial to understand that it is not mandatory. Muslim feminists interpreting the concept of polygamy have concluded that Islam actually advocates for monogamous relationships and

they cite several instances as evidence. For example, Wadud's interpretation of verse 4:129, "You are never able to be fair and just between women." allows her to draw the conclusion that the Quran leans towards monogamy as the optimal marital arrangement (1999, 83).

The tendency to reference the example of the Prophet Muhammad rather than citing verse 4:3 of the Quran can be observed through a comprehensive examination of various chat platforms addressing polygamy within the context of Islam, as well as an in-depth analysis of this specific Facebook Muslim women group. The context surrounding the revelation of polygamy, however, often appears overlooked. The primary emphasis usually involves the fact that this was a practice endorsed by the Prophet.

In Islam, the Sunnah, which encompasses the practices and teachings of the Prophet, is held in high regard. However, adherence to it is not obligatory. Muslims primarily seek guidance and assistance from Allah rather than the Prophet. The Prophet is venerated as the epitome of human behaviour, and his path is perceived as a means to attain knowledge and understanding. There is also a prevailing belief that individuals who pursue knowledge along this path will find their journey to Paradise eased. For instance, "Seeking knowledge is a duty upon every Muslim,"[11] (Sunan Ibn Majah, 224), and "If anyone travels on a road in search of knowledge, Allah will cause him to travel on one of the roads of Paradise."[12] (Abu Dawood, 3641). In this context, "a road" refers to the path led by the Prophet Muhammad. The act of following the Prophet's teachings and practices, or the Sunnah, is considered a form of knowledge-seeking in Islam. The word "the path" in Hadiths is often used to denote the principles or way of life propagated by the Prophet Muhammad.

One member of the Muslim female online group describes polygamy:

> "Polygamy cannot be universally applied, and we must refrain from portraying it as an ideal sunnah that everyone should embrace and find joy in."

This comment regarding polygamy from the woman's perspective invites us to explore the complexities of this practice within a wider context. It highlights the understanding that polygamy is not a universal solution suitable for everyone, and underscores the need to acknowledge the diversity in how it is perceived and experienced across different cultural and individual landscapes.

To expand this interpretation, we should consider that polygamy is deeply intertwined with both cultural and religious narratives, yet its portrayal

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[11] https://sunnah.com/ibnmajah:224
[12] https://sunnah.com/abudawud:3641

as a universally positive practice overlooks the varied realities faced by individuals within these marriages. It is essential to appreciate that personal experiences with polygamy can vary greatly—what might be fulfilling or acceptable for some could be challenging or undesirable for others. This interpretation calls for a shift away from a one-dimensional view of polygamy as an inherently wonderful Sunnah and instead embraces a more inclusive conversation that respects multiple perspectives.

Questioning sacred Islamic practices such as polygamy requires a nuanced understanding and deep knowledge of religious, cultural, and societal contexts. Without such understanding, it can be challenging to engage in a meaningful criticism that respects the complexities involved. However, there is a growing call for recognizing and accepting the diversity of perspectives on polygamy, moving beyond the notion of it being a universally beneficial practice.

When examining the narratives of women in polygamous relationships, a recurring theme is the questioning of the status quo that portrays polygamy as a wonderful Sunnah. These women often find themselves at the forefront of challenging traditional views and exploring the realities of polygamy in practice. Their experiences shed light on the subtleties often overlooked by broader societal norms.

These shared stories frequently highlight how polygamy, while commonly accepted within certain Islamic traditions, is being critically evaluated by those who live it daily. Women in these narratives point out issues of gender inequality and male dominance that can accompany such arrangements:

> "Waalaikom assalam sister, I wish men would consider the impact their choices have on their wives before pursuing what seems to be the only Sunnah they are eager to follow."
>
> "These days, many men engage in polygamy not for the sake of Sunnah, but are slowly straying from its true purpose. May Allah guide them to the right path."

Women's comments underline a critical issue: men often overlook the emotional and psychological effects their decisions have on their wives when opting for additional marriages. This selective adherence to the Sunnah, where individuals choose only the aspects that suit their desires, strays from the core religious intents of these practices.

Islamic feminism plays a crucial role in addressing these concerns by actively engaging with Islamic doctrine to advocate for gender equality. It calls for a re-examination of scriptural texts and traditions, rooted in the Quranic principle of universal human equality. This form of feminism

critiques the patriarchal misuse of Islamic teachings, which some men exploit to justify practices that oppress women. Scholar Barlas (2002) maintains that the Quran has been interpreted to uphold male-centric power structures, which Islamic feminism seeks to dismantle.

The comments also highlight how polygamy, when misused, becomes a tradition serving primarily male interests, often lacking proper context and legal constraints. This misuse can severely impact women's rights, especially in jurisdictions without strict legal frameworks governing polygamous practices. The absence of such legal limitations often leaves women vulnerable to the whims of tradition rather than the protective intentions of religious doctrine.

Women are utilizing performative acts as a form of resistance against the male-dominated narrative that portrays polygamy as Sunnah—as solely beneficial. By bringing sensitive issues to the forefront, these women empower themselves not by challenging the religious significance of polygamy itself, but by highlighting its exploitation to favour one gender over another. This approach allows them to expose the distortion of the practice, thereby empowering other women to question the acceptance of polygamy merely because it is considered Sunnah. Instead, they encourage a more thoughtful consideration, prompting women to weigh these decisions carefully and recognize the broader implications of the practice. Through this nuanced opposition, they create an environment where women can make empowered choices, fostering a dialogue that reclaims agency and equality.

Another comment spotlights the potential misuse of religious practices to justify gender inequality, calling women to remain vigilant about their rights and to critically assess the broader implications of polygamous relationships:

> "The issue [i.e. in the polygamy] is the neglect of women. <...> We can't be encouraging women to forsake their rights because its 'Sunnah' to do polygamy."

The core issue with polygamy is not rooted in Islam itself, but in the ways it has been interpreted and manipulated over time. Often, the sanctity of religious practices is wielded as a shield to deflect scrutiny from the way polygamy is executed, rather than examining the practice in its entirety. This misinterpretation is largely due to patriarchal readings of religious texts that skew the original teachings to reinforce male dominance. This perspective can marginalize women's experiences by framing their struggles within polygamous relationships as personal issues rather than systemic problems inherent in the interpretation itself.

Muslim feminists, among them Wadud and Barlas, have argued that the Quran's guidance on polygamy was context-specific, aimed at providing protection and justice for such vulnerable women as widows and orphans, rather than as a blanket endorsement of the practice. As highlighted in feminist discourse, this exploitation of religious sanctity sustains gender inequality by positioning male interpretations as the ultimate authority. By invoking the sacred nature of religious practices, these interpretations are shielded from scrutiny, suggesting that if a practice is deemed holy, it cannot be inherently harmful. Consequently, when women face difficulties within these frameworks, their adversities are dismissed as personal failings. However, research indicates a trend showing that the issues with polygamy are not isolated incidents, but part of a broader pattern that affects many women, underscoring systemic challenges within these practices.

Muslim feminist scholars emphasize the vital importance of returning to the true teachings of Islam, which advocate for justice and equality—principles that have been overshadowed by distorted patriarchal interpretations focused on maintaining traditional power structures. To address these distortions, it is crucial to re-examine religious texts through a lens that prioritizes fairness, compassion, and the intrinsic value of all individuals. A significant constraint in polygamous relationships is the requirement for a man to treat all his wives equally. However, the interpretation of "equality" in this context is often ambiguous and varies widely. Muslim feminists challenge this limited viewpoint, arguing that proponents of polygamy often interpret "justice" in these relationships narrowly, focusing merely on material aspects. They assert that this perspective neglects other critical dimensions of equality and fairness, advocating for a broader, more holistic understanding of justice within relationships.

Equality is a complex concept, often challenged by the varying circumstances between families and therefore raises questions about the fair distribution of resources in polygamous relationships. A woman inquires if a husband is obligated to distribute everything, including food, equally between two wives, considering one wife has three children while the other has none yet.

The majority of responses by online group of women stressed that equality should not be enforced blindly, but rather, the specific circumstances should be taken into account:

> "It's about equal time, not equal everything. If one has more children, the other can't expect the same when their needs differ."

"He can't favour one wife over the other in terms of quality of things or personal allowances. He must be fair to both wives and children. It's unjust for a wife with four kids to ration among five while the childless wife lives in abundance."

"Equality doesn't equal justice. He needs to ensure they all have the same quality of life, but that doesn't mean the amounts will be the same."

In contemplating the dynamics of equality and fairness within polygamous relationships, it becomes evident that a one-size-fits-all approach is neither feasible nor just. True equality transcends mere arithmetic distribution of resources; it is a profound understanding of each individual's needs, shaped by the unique circumstances of their lives. The essence of fairness lies not in identical treatment, but in equitable adaptation to diverse needs, ensuring that each family member's dignity and well-being are respected.

In Islamic law, the concept of fairness in polygamous marriages is rooted in the Quranic directive that a husband must treat all his wives justly. This includes providing for them materially and emotionally, ensuring that each wife receives her due rights and care. However, the interpretation of what constitutes "fair and just" treatment can vary. Islamic teachings emphasize that a husband should not show favouritism in terms of financial support or emotional attention. Each wife should receive equal treatment in terms of living conditions, financial support, and time spent with the husband. In many Islamic countries, the application of these principles is subject to interpretation by religious scholars and courts, which can lead to variations in how fairness is implemented. Courts may consider the specific circumstances of each family when making decisions about resource distribution. The overarching principle is justice, which may not always mean equal distribution of resources but rather equitable treatment that considers the needs and circumstances of each wife and her children.

Women's proactive participation in decision-making processes can lead to more equitable outcomes, ensuring that fairness is not only a matter of legal obligation but also of mutual respect and understanding within the marriage.

When it comes to non-monetary issues that are time-consuming, most responses were rather specific and did not demand fairness in the division of time. When a woman expresses her situation, she questions whether the man can allocate more time to the wife who has more children. The answers emphasize that time should be divided equally regardless of children:

"Having more children there doesn't mean he's allowed to change the arrangement without your consent if he does he's being unfair."

"He is allowed to spend time with the kids out of the mother's home if needed, but cannot go to their mothers home if it causes an injustice in time."

According to some members of Facebook group, the situation shows the importance of fairness and balance between wives (excluding children). The man cannot visit a particular wife's home if it creates an unfair division of his time among the families. The situation also highlights the need for flexibility. The man can adjust his schedule to spend more time with his children when necessary, suggesting that rigid rules may not always work in real-life family situations.

In this Facebook group, women in polygamous marriages harness the power of online communities to collectively redefine and reinforce community values and norms. By engaging in these conversations, women collectively define and reinforce community values and norms, which serves to guide their actions and decisions. This process of shared learning and support is crucial in empowering women, as it enables them to articulate and advocate for what they perceive as just and fair within their families. The mutual exchange of ideas and experiences enhances their confidence and capacity to influence positive change, both within their relationships and in broader community settings.

These digital dialogues are not just about offering advice; they are about building a network of support that empowers women to take ownership of their roles in polygamous marriages and assert their agency. By shaping the discourse around fairness and justice, these communities play a pivotal role in redefining traditional norms and fostering a more equitable approach to time and responsibility distribution in polygamous marriages. Through collective empowerment, women are better equipped to navigate the complexities of their familial roles, ensuring that their voices contribute to the evolving narrative of justice and equality.

In online communities, women in polygamous marriages find a wellspring of support and shared understanding, allowing them to face the multifaceted challenges inherent in their relationships. These digital spaces not only empower women but also encourage open and honest discussions, forming a new discourse around polygamy that significantly diverges from traditional views, such as the notion of it being a "beautiful Sunnah."

By sharing their lived experiences, women redefine their understanding of polygamous life, creating a narrative that more accurately reflects their realities and challenges. This culture of openness fosters resilience and strength, empowering women to speak freely about their challenges and reshaping perceptions of polygamy. As we delve deeper into these realities,

the community-driven conversations underscore the importance of collective voices in challenging and redefining conventional narratives. Among these is the critical examination of polygamy, shifting the perception from a "beautiful sunnah" to recognizing it as a potentially traumatic experience.

While these discussions show that women actively engage with religious and moral norms, they should not be automatically understood as expressions of agency. Rather than aiming to change existing structures, these conversations mainly reflect collective attempts to interpret, clarify, and apply religious ideas of justice and fairness in everyday life. Through these exchanges, women seek practical guidance on how to live within polygamous arrangements in ways they perceive as more just and manageable. This form of engagement helps them navigate existing norms, but it largely remains within their boundaries, focusing on interpretation and adjustment rather than on structural transformation.

Labelling polygamy as a traumatic experience might seem audacious, yet the subsequent experiences of many women lend credibility to such a claim. The theme of suffering prominently pervades the Facebook post, which discusses women's experiences in polygamous relationships. For example, a woman asks:

> "Are there sisters in polygamy who have happily accepted and feel at peace especially if you are the initial wife? What does it take to be in that position? Why are we the ones suffering? I feel like being jealous and insecure is just an internal torture."

Discussions surrounding polygamy vividly illustrate the emotional and psychological challenges women face. The recurring use of words "torture", "testing of God", "grief", and "hardship" provides a window into the profound pain and struggle that define many of these women's experiences.

> "This is a huge test for us. I look at it as I am being tested by my Raab (i.e. God) and He loves me more."
>
> "Attach yourself to your Quran our spouses, families, and children really are a test."
>
> "Think that complete feeling is achievable, we will always face moments that make us feel jealous or insecure."
>
> "I try to remind myself that this is my test and Allah knows what I can handle. That is what has kept me going this far."
>
> "Any chance you can take a few weeks off and just let yourself process your grief?
>
> "Polygamy is a hardship."

In the context of these comments, women frame their experiences within a spiritual context, which serves as both a refuge and a source of

strength. The notion of being "tested by my Raab (i.e. God)" reflects an effort to interpret hardship through a religious lens, where suffering is understood as part of a spiritual journey rather than a meaningless burden. By drawing on faith, women are able to assign meaning to emotional pain and to endure difficult circumstances. This spiritual framing does not remove the hardship itself, but it provides a way to cope with it by situating personal suffering within a broader religious narrative that emphasizes patience, endurance, and trust in God. Following Butler, this reframing does not amount to resistance in a transformative sense, but it may be read as a minimal form of distancing from complete subjugation, where endurance itself becomes a way of maintaining a liveable self.

Engagement with faith in these narratives involves ongoing personal efforts to maintain emotional stability and moral orientation in difficult circumstances. Rather than altering the conditions of polygamous relationships, religious beliefs and practices support women in managing emotional strain and sustaining everyday routines. In this sense, faith functions less as a source of change and more as a practical resource that helps women continue their daily lives and responsibilities, even when external circumstances remain unchanged. These forms of reflection are oriented toward endurance and meaning-making rather than toward deliberation over alternative courses of action. As such, they help women cope with hardship but do not yet constitute agency in the analytical sense used in this study.

In pursuit of a deeper and more nuanced understanding of polygamy— its mechanisms, justifications, and societal relevance today—I have been exploring the conversations of various mixed-gender online Facebook groups on the subject. These globally accessible online forums offer invaluable insights that transcend cultural and geographical boundaries. By engaging with a diverse array of perspectives, particularly through men's comments in mixed groups on polygamy, I have gained valuable insights into the underlying dynamics and perspectives that reveal the challenges women encounter in these relationships. This has deepened my understanding of women's experiences and struggles within the framework of polygamy.

In my examination of various Facebook groups centred on polygamy, I have observed that men frequently approach the topic in accordance with the principles of the Sunnah. Thus, polygamy is perceived as inherently righteous, the Prophet's way of life is regarded as the most correct path thus warranting adherence whenever possible. However, women often perceive polygamy as a challenging and complex practice, not favourable aspect of their relationships. They emphasize the importance of being more open in discussions and not shying away from voicing the difficulties it presents.

Women have highlighted that men often practice polygamy without upholding the principles of equality, which further exacerbates the challenges they face:

> "Entering into a second marriage is regarded as a Sunnah, and it is permissible under Islamic law, irrespective of the reasons behind it."
>
> "It is not necessary to inform the first wife about a second marriage, as both the Sunnah and the Quran have sanctioned the practice of polygamy long before our time."
>
> "Polygamy is regarded as a Sunnah, and those who practice it in adherence to the Sunnah are considered true believers."
>
> "Going into a second marriage isn't just allowed; it's seen as following the Prophet's way. By choosing polygamy, we stick to the path laid out in our faith, which makes our belief stronger."
>
> "Polygamy shows how dedicated someone is to Islam, lifting those who follow it as true believers. It's not just something allowed, but a brave way to live by divine teachings, no matter how much society changes."

The belief that engaging in polygamy is a demonstration of true faith reflects a particular interpretation of religious devotion. In this view, adherence to the Sunnah is seen as a pathway to achieving a higher spiritual status, aligning one's actions closely with the tenets of Islam. This belief is predicated on the notion that the Prophet's practices are the ideal model for Muslim life.

Some traditional interpretations of Islamic texts suggest that informing the first wife about a second marriage is not required, as both the Quran and Hadiths have historically sanctioned polygamy, indicating its roots in earlier societal norms. This view relies on a theological foundation where divine commandments and prophetic traditions are prioritized over modern marital practices. However, in today's context, where transparency and mutual consent are highly valued, this perspective can be contentious.

The perception that men may not feel the need to discuss polygamy with their first wives, because it is deemed permissible, introduces significant implications for marital dynamics. In contemporary relationships, where open communication is crucial, neglecting these discussions can lead to misunderstandings, a lack of trust, and feelings of neglect among spouses, ultimately straining the marriage. In many countries where polygamy is legal, it is a legal requirement to inform existing wives before entering into another marriage, and sometimes even obtain their consent. Yet, it appears from some discussions that men may hold a divine lifestyle in higher regard than the legal framework in such matters.

Furthermore, men assert the significance of polygamy to women, sometimes silencing their voices by emphasizing it as an unquestionable tradition of the Prophet, thereby encouraging acceptance without further debate:

> "Sisters, polygamy isn't a trap but a place where you can live out one of the Prophet's honoured traditions."
>
> "Ladies, there's no need to complain about polygamy; it's part of the divine plan. Accepting it means respecting our religious teachings and trusting in the path that has been set for us."
>
> "Finally, if we heed those who oppose polygamy, we may end up abandoning other important practices. As Allah reminds us, sometimes the things we dislike might actually be beneficial, and the things we like might not be."

As we can see, men here underscore polygamy as a vital tradition that should remain unquestioned, drawing from its roots in religious teachings. In contrast, women tend to explore the intricate details of polygamy, examining how it influences their personal lives and seeking a deeper understanding of its broader implications. This dynamic highlights the contrast between men's focus on preserving tradition and women's pursuit of understanding and adapting to the realities of polygamy in their daily lives.

Building upon Butler's theory of gender performativity and power dynamics, the discourse around polygamy can be seen as a reflection of male dominance. Butler's ideas suggest that gender roles are socially constructed through repetitive performances, which, in the context of polygamy, manifest as the expectation for women to accept this family model as a duty. This aligns with the notion that men are granted the right to practice polygamy, while women are compelled to embrace it as part of their religious and social obligations. The traditional narratives that men propagate serve to reinforce their authority and privilege, embedding these roles deeper into societal norms. As men emphasize polygamy as an unquestionable tradition, they are, in essence, perpetuating a system where their dominance is normalized and women's voices are subdued.

In navigating the complexities of polygamous systems, women may appear to exercise a form of agency through spiritual engagement and open dialogue. By drawing on faith, they seek strength and emotional resilience, and create spaces where personal experiences and difficulties can be shared and articulated. These practices can be understood as ways of actively managing challenging circumstances and asserting a sense of self within them. At the same time, when examined more closely, such forms of engagement remain largely oriented toward coping and adaptation rather than toward

deliberate action aimed at altering existing structures. In this sense, while women are not merely passive recipients of polygamous arrangements, their practices do not fully align with agency understood as a reflexive action directed toward alternative courses of action or structural change.

Taken together, the discussions of Muslim women in Facebook group examined in this subsection show that online spaces function as sites of emotional support and normative negotiation rather than as arenas of overt opposition. Within these environments, women do not reject religious frameworks but actively engage with their meanings, interpretations, and implications in everyday life. Polygamy, while frequently framed as Sunnah, is thus not experienced as a fixed or uniformly positive practice, but as a morally and emotionally demanding arrangement that requires continuous interpretation and adjustment.

Women's engagement with religion in this context is primarily oriented toward coping, endurance, and the management of suffering, rather than toward efforts to transform existing structures. At the same time, this engagement cannot be reduced to passive acceptance of norms, as it involves ongoing reflection and negotiation that gesture toward agency, while remaining primarily oriented toward endurance rather than toward deliberate structural change.


### 3.1.2 Exploring Women's Reasons for Polygamous Marriages

The previous section examined how online discussions around polygamy are structured by religious and moral frameworks, particularly the normative framing of polygamy as the Sunnah, and how women engage with these frameworks in everyday life. Building on this, the present section shifts attention to a more specific empirical question: how women themselves explain and justify their involvement in polygamous arrangements. Beyond functioning as a space for emotional exchange and normative orientation, the Facebook group also operates as a practical environment in which women seek additional wives for their husbands or consider becoming co-wives themselves. To explore the motivations behind such participation, I posed a direct question to the group:

> "Why would you consider to become a co-wife? While in the past, women were often reliant on men for sustenance due to restrictions on education and employment, today's women are capable of supporting themselves."

Our discussions have repeatedly drawn attention to the social standing of divorced women, a topic emerging as a significant theme among the participants of the Facebook group. A shared perception is that divorce often severely limits a woman's prospects of forming a monogamous family, burdening her with both societal stigma and financial instability.

For some divorced women, financial challenges become a critical factor, as limited opportunities and economic hardships significantly shape their decisions and outlook on future relationships. These dual pressures of societal judgment and economic vulnerability frequently compel women to seek arrangements that offer financial security, even when those arrangements may not align with their personal preferences or aspirations:

> "A large portion of women live in conditions of poverty. For many, polygamy provides financial support and stability for themselves and their children. In some cases, women feel compelled to choose this path as a practical alternative to divorce."

> "Polygamy can sometimes represent stability in unstable circumstances. For single mothers with limited income, the support from a polygamous arrangement may outweigh the challenges of being on their own."

> "Economic disparity plays a huge role. In communities where women have little to no property rights or equal opportunities, polygamy often becomes a route to securing a livelihood."

The concept of instrumental agency (Burke 201) provides an insightful framework to understand women's choices in polygamous relationships when driven by financial security. Burke explains how instrumental agency emphasizes how individuals leverage their participation in traditional or religious systems for tangible, non-religious advantages, such as material benefits or economic stability. Women in polygamous relationships often face societal pressures and significant economic challenges, with limited access to resources or independent income. By strategically entering these relationships, they can secure financial support, shared household responsibilities, and stability for themselves and their children. This pragmatic use of polygamy aligns with the idea that such decisions, while shaped by structural inequalities, represent a form of agency through pragmatic adaptation to structural constraints. Rather than purely passive participants, these women demonstrate a capacity for negotiation and practical decision-making centred on their immediate survival and long-term well-being. However, it becomes clear from the comments that the greater issue lies not just in financial aspects, but in the perception of females about their limited opportunities to form new families.

Many women express concern that potential partners often view their divorced status as a drawback, perceiving it as indicative of complexities or baggage. This sentiment becomes even more pronounced when children from a previous marriage are involved. The presence of a child frequently adds another layer of hesitation for prospective partners, leading women to feel that their chances of remarriage are significantly hindered:

> "Some ladies like me divorced and reverted need polygamy... polygamy feels like a promising way to meet a genuine partner who truly values her for who she is."
>
> "As a divorced woman, I've realized polygamy could be a practical choice. It offers a chance for stability and companionship without the heavy expectations of a traditional monogamous relationship."
>
> "Being a divorced woman with a child, I've come to accept that my expectations have to be realistic—there's only so much I can hope for."
>
> "I never thought I'd consider this, but as a divorcee with two kids, my options are limited."

It is difficult to account for the social context of these women, as it depends on understanding the specific societal environment a woman is part of and the attitudes within that society towards divorced women with children. However, it could be said that for these women, the challenges extend beyond just societal judgment. They often experience internalized feelings of reduced self-worth, fuelled by cultural or community attitudes that idealize a woman's role in a stable, monogamous marriage. This prevailing view perpetuates the belief that divorced women, especially those with children, are less desirable for future partners, who may prioritize those perceived as having fewer obligations or complications.

This combination of external perceptions and internal struggles shapes their experiences and underscores the barriers they face when attempting to rebuild their lives or seek a new marital relationship.

From a religious perspective, Islam neither prohibits nor discourages marriage to a divorced woman, even if she has children. On the contrary, it emphasizes the importance of supporting and reintegrating such women into the social fabric. An example of this can be found on a platform where Muslims can submit anonymous questions to Sunni clerics. One query touched upon whether a divorced woman with children might be obliged to remarry. The cleric responded by affirming that Islam places no restrictions on remarriage in these circumstances. The key criterion is the woman's devotion to her faith, her strong character, and admirable conduct, all of which make her a worthy partner. However, the cleric also noted that, when choosing

between a virgin and a previously married woman of equal piety and virtue, Islamic scholars often recommend marrying the virgin.

In Islamic teachings, the preference for marrying a virgin is often based on several considerations. One hadith suggests that virgins are seen as having "sweeter mouths, more fertile wombs, and are more content with what is little,"[13] which implies they might be more adaptable and content in marriage due to their lack of previous marital experiences. Additionally, the Prophet Muhammad is noted to have recommended marrying virgins for their perceived qualities in relationships, such as being more playful and engaging.[14]

It is important to note that these recommendations are not obligatory, and the primary consideration in choosing a spouse should be their religious commitment and character. The teachings emphasize that a devout and morally upright woman, regardless of her marital history, is a suitable partner. However, from the above comments, we see that women often doubt their chances of marrying in a monogamous marriage precisely because they have been married before.

Drawing on Butler, these accounts suggest that women's assessments of their marital options are shaped by repeated social expectations surrounding femininity, marriage, and respectability. Rather than being understood as purely individual preferences or personal shortcomings, such assessments emerge within broader normative frameworks that define which forms of marriage are seen as desirable, appropriate, or attainable. These norms do not fully determine women's actions, but they structure the horizon of possibilities within which choices are imagined and evaluated.

Over time, women may come to internalize these expectations, aligning their self-awareness and aspirations with socially reinforced ideas about worth, desirability, and legitimacy. In this context, women may interpret their divorced status, lack of virginity, or motherhood as factors that reduce their chances of entering a monogamous marriage. Importantly, this process should not be understood as a simple or passive absorption of norms. Rather, it reflects how repeated social messages—circulating through family relations, community attitudes, religious discourse, and broader cultural narratives—inform how women assess their own positions and available options.

Butler's framework helps to illuminate how such norms gain their power not through explicit coercion, but through repetition and normalization.

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[13] https://www.islamweb.net/en/fatwa/19926/the-preference-of-marrying-virgin-women
[14] https://seekersguidance.org/answers/family-ties/marrying-a-virgin/

At the same time, this perspective does not imply that women are fully determined by these expectations. Instead, it highlights how women negotiate their choices within a constrained normative landscape, where certain paths come to appear more realistic or viable than others, even when they do not fully align with personal desires.

Marriage is another deeply ingrained cultural expectation tied to gender relations, shaping how individuals, particularly women, understand their worth and identity:

> "Avoid settling into a life of singleness, as marriage is a practice upheld by Allah's Messenger."
>
> "Marriage is a key aspect of a fulfilling life, providing spiritual, emotional, and social balance."
>
> "Staying unmarried should not be seen as a viable long-term choice, as marriage completes half of one's faith and fosters love, mercy, and tranquillity between spouses."
>
> "Building a life within the bonds of marriage is not just a personal choice but a responsibility to uphold religious values."

By raising the question why women choose to live in a polygamous arrangement, I aimed to highlight that an unmarried woman can embody independence and the ability to care for herself and maintain her own livelihood. What, then, makes becoming a co-wife a more favourable choice? The responses suggest that, in most contexts, marriage is regarded with greater respect and importance than remaining single. Within the framework of religion, especially in Islam, marriage holds profound value and is deeply revered. According to a hadith of the Prophet Muhammad, entering into marriage fulfils half of one's religious duties. However, this does not mean that being single is disparaged or viewed as sinful.

Drawing on Butler's concept of gender performativity, the strong emphasis on marriage can be understood as part of a normative framework through which femininity, respectability, and social belonging are produced and sustained. Rather than being naturally given, the association between marriage, personal worth, and fulfilment is reinforced through repeated cultural and religious narratives that position marriage as a key marker of a meaningful and complete life.

Within this framework, prioritizing marriage does not necessarily reflect uncritical conformity to social expectations. For some women, particularly those who face limited access to monogamous marriage due to divorce, widowhood, or motherhood, orienting themselves toward marriage within an Islamic family may function as a way of maintaining religious continuity and moral recognition. At the same time, such orientations remain

shaped by structural constraints and limited alternatives, and therefore reflect situated forms of engagement rather than agency oriented toward the reconfiguration of available options.

Drawing on Mahmood's perspective, women's orientation toward marriage can be understood as a form of religious self-formation rather than as an expression of autonomy or empowerment in a liberal sense. Mahmood's work highlights that agency may be exercised through the cultivation of religious dispositions and practices, even when such actions do not involve resistance to prevailing norms.

In this context, prioritizing marriage reflects an effort to live in accordance with religious ideals and to secure moral recognition within the community, particularly in situations where alternative life trajectories are limited. Such engagement involves a continuous ethical self-reflection, shaped by both faith commitments and structural constraints, and should therefore be understood as a situated and disciplined form of agency rather than as the pursuit of individual fulfilment or an increase in personal autonomy understood as freedom of choice.

Taken together, Butler's and Mahmood's perspectives allow for an analysis that distinguishes between how marriage is constituted as a powerful normative ideal and how women engage with this ideal through ethical self-formation rather than resistance or structural transformation.

There is another perspective that illustrates how polygamy can function as a social support system within a family. For first wives considering or actively seeking a co-wife, the arrangement is sometimes viewed as a means of shared responsibility and mutual assistance. One Facebook group member, reflecting on this dynamic, raises a compelling question about the value of polygamy in alleviating household burdens. She writes:

> "If you're dealing with health challenges and have several children to care for, managing everything on your own while your husband is at work can be quite overwhelming. You might also find it difficult to meet your husband's needs whenever he desires. Could polygamy be a practical solution in such circumstances, offering extra help around the house?"

Within this perspective, polygamy is not merely a marital arrangement but is framed as a pragmatic response to the demands of household and family care. It redistributes the responsibilities of domestic tasks, allowing them to be shared among multiple wives. This dynamic can ostensibly reduce the workload for each woman and enhance the overall functionality of the household. Proponents of this arrangement argue that by easing the pressures of domestic responsibilities, polygamy contributes to the collective well-being

of the family unit and ensures the husband's satisfaction as the household is more efficiently managed. At the same time, this framing raises important questions about how care, responsibility, and gendered labour are organized within polygamous households.

While polygamy may appear to offer practical benefits, it can also reproduce existing gendered divisions of care and responsibility. Framing polygamy as a solution to domestic overload tends to reaffirm women's primary association with caregiving and household management, rather than questioning how such responsibilities are distributed in the first place. In this sense, the redistribution of domestic labour among co-wives may function less as a challenge to patriarchal arrangements and more as an adaptation to them, reorganizing women's labour without fundamentally altering underlying gender norms.

Butler's concept of gender performativity highlights how societal norms consistently enforce and normalize traditional roles, such as the nurturing, self-sacrificing wife, framing polygamy as a mechanism that reinforces patriarchal dominance rather than promoting equality. Similarly, Millett's (1970) critique of patriarchy underlines how polygamy exemplifies its control by redistributing domestic roles among women, benefiting men by absolving them of household responsibilities. Together, these perspectives show that polygamy sustains gendered power hierarchies instead of challenging the broader societal structures that uphold them. While feminist theory highlights the structural implications of polygamy, women's narratives also point to relational and affective dimensions that shape how co-wife arrangements are lived and understood.

A co-wife is often seen not just as a helping hand and a practical solution for managing the demands of daily life and easing the burden of fulfilling the extensive responsibilities of an Islamic wife but also as a source of valuable companionship. For some women, the dynamic extends beyond pragmatic support to include a deep sense of sisterhood, where the co-wife is viewed as a genuine part of the family. This perspective embraces the idea that a co-wife is more than a partner to the husband; she is also a companion to the first wife, offering emotional support, shared understanding, and a bond of mutual care:

> "Although I am still able, I face physical challenges and health issues that make daily tasks more demanding for me compared to the average individual. I envision a potential sisterly bond with a co-wife, where we support each other and share a home. I would hope for her to become an integral part of our family, forming meaningful connections not just with my husband but with everyone in our household."

Another participant, a reverted Muslim woman, the only follower of Islam in her family, faces challenges in safeguarding her children's Islamic upbringing, especially with health concerns. Fearing a lack of trusted guardianship to ensure her children are raised as Muslims if something happens to her, she sees a co-wife as both practical support and a solution to these fears. This arrangement could provide a bond of trust, shared responsibility, and a reliable person to uphold her children's faith and values for the future:

> "Also a big reason I'm thinking about this is because I am a reverted Muslim. The Only Muslim in my whole family and with these health challenges, I worry I'd have no person to hand over guardianship of my children to that I could trust to bring them up as Muslims if anything were to happen to me before my time was expected... Like to be part of my will. My husband is only bio dad to 1 of my 3 children and their father is not interested."

Agency, in this context, manifests as the reverted Muslim woman's conscious and proactive effort to take control of her life circumstances and secure her family's future. Despite facing numerous challenges she exercises autonomy by exploring paths that align with her values and priorities. Opting to consider a co-wife is not simply a passive acceptance of circumstances; it is a deliberate and reasoned choice that underscores her ability to act in her and her children's best interests.

The author of the above quote concluded her comment with the phrase "It takes a tribe." This is a saying that emphasizes the importance of community support in achieving goals or overcoming challenges. It is a variation of the popular phrase "It takes a village to raise a child," which highlights that child-bearing is a communal effort and not just the responsibility of the parents.

The choice of the reverted Muslim woman emphasizes her empowerment within her unique family dynamic. While some might view polygamy through a lens of submission, her case demonstrates that polygamy can also serve as a medium for autonomy when pursued on her own terms. By considering a co-wife, she is shaping how her household functions, fostering bonds of trust and support, and actively addressing structural or relational gaps in her family. This dynamic illustrates her ability to negotiate her role in her religious and familial life, showcasing her resilience and resourcefulness.

Women responding in the comments section were largely in favour of this concept, stating that:

> "Nothing wrong with another pair of helping hands."

> "I love the thought of having a big family where my children and I have that village of women to help raise one another's children."

In the conversation with a woman in her 50s aspiring to become a second wife, the woman who is looking for a second wife to her husband reveals:

> "As an older woman unable to have children, I understand that many men seek to build a family. I deeply respect the role of the man as the head of the household and am content to spend my time in a halal way, even if he's not with me every day. It would truly be an honour to support my co-wife and help care for her children."

While such accounts emphasize cooperation and mutual support, they do not prescribe a single form of co-wife relations. Women remain engaged in ongoing decisions about how, and to what extent, they relate to one another within polygamous households. It is important to understand that, in many cases, the first or second wife may choose not to have any relationship with the co-wife, highlighting each wife's autonomy in deciding the nature of their interactions within a polygamous marriage. Co-wives are not bound by any obligation to assist the co-wife or her children. Islam grants her the right to demand her own residence and choose her level of interaction with the first family, if any. Her priorities may extend to establishing her own household, focusing on her own family, and pursuing her individual needs, which are hers to define. As one interlocutor indicated:

> "It's important to keep in mind that after marriage, her role within the household is likely to evolve. She won't be there to assist with the children; she will also take on the role of a wife and may even have her own children in the future, depending on what unfolds."

Polygamous marriages often come with shifting priorities, reflecting the diverse needs and rights of everyone involved. While traditionally viewed as a system for men to provide aid to women, such as widows in need, modern perspectives reveal a broader, more nuanced understanding. Some women see polygamy as an opportunity for mutual support, choosing to redefine its purpose through their expressions of agency. By willingly engaging in these relationships as a means of collaboration and shared responsibility, they add new meaning to polygamy, transforming it into a framework where women actively shape and contribute to the dynamics of the family structure. This perspective highlights how women can exercise autonomy and reshape traditional roles within this context.

While women in polygamous marriages may express a desire for co-wives to become like sisters or integral members of the family, this inclination is often accompanied by specific conditions that shape these dynamics.

Factors such as health challenges or infertility frequently surface as influential considerations. Infertility can play a pivotal role in fostering acceptance of a co-wife, as she might hope this addition fulfils a shared familial goal, such as having children:

> "At first, I was scared of feeling left out, but now I realize having a co-wife means I don't have to carry all the burden alone. Since I can't have children, at least I know she can be there for our shared dream of a bigger family."
>
> "I agreed to polygamy because I couldn't give my husband the children he deserved."
>
> "I never thought I'd be okay with a co-wife, but after struggling with infertility for years, I realized I couldn't give my husband the child he always wanted."

These comments open up two resonating perspectives that frame women's roles within polygamous marriages. On the one hand, the comments highlight a troubling societal narrative that a woman's value in marriage is heavily tied to her ability to bear children. Butler's theories on gender performativity and societal construction of roles offer a lens to critique this notion. Drawing on Butler, these roles often dictate how women "perform" within structures like marriage, pushing them into predefined moulds of value and purpose. The comments carry an undertone of resignation to this societal expectation. Phrases like *"I couldn't give my husband the children he deserved"* or *"Since I can't have children, at least I know she can be there for our shared dream of a bigger family"* suggest that the women see their worth in contributing to family-building mainly through childbirth. This reveals how traditional family systems might equate women's success and purpose with biological reproduction. If a woman is unable to have children, this perceived "failure" creates a gap that the presence of a co-wife is expected to fill. While the inclusion of a co-wife might alleviate some practical burdens, it often reinforces the expectation that the ultimate goal of a family system is children, marginalizing women who cannot fulfil this role.

Such a system ignores the fact that reproductive issues are not exclusive to women. If, for example, a husband is unable to have children, societal narratives rarely offer "solutions" for the woman's fulfilment within the marriage. This imbalance reflects a gendered double standard and intensifies the structural inequities that Butler critiques.

In contrast, viewing these comments through the lens of religious agency offers a different interpretation. Here, women's acceptance of polygamy or co-wives can be understood not only as shaped by societal expectations, but also by religious commitments and ethical reasoning. Within

Islamic values, the concept of family holds a profound importance, with children viewed as blessings and as part of a morally valued marital life. From this perspective, polygamy may be experienced not as a diminishment of personal worth, but as a way of aligning one's life with a divinely meaningful vision of family and responsibility.

In line with Mahmood's understanding of religious agency, ethical and religious orientations toward polygamy do not imply resistance to dominant norms, nor do they necessarily signal expanded autonomy. Rather, they reflect forms of ethical self-formation in which women seek to live according to religious ideals within existing social and structural constraints. Welcoming a co-wife may thus be understood as a disciplined and value-oriented practice, shaped by faith commitments and communal responsibilities, rather than as a simple reaction to external pressure or an expression of individual empowerment.

While these perspectives seem to diverge, they also intersect in revealing the complexities faced by women in such marital arrangements. Even within constrained conditions, women are not passive. Throughout these discussions, women actively reflect on their circumstances, make choices among limited options, negotiate relationships, and set boundaries within polygamous arrangements. Such practices involve deliberate decision-making and responsibility-taking within existing religious and social frameworks. Agency here is thus expressed not through the rejection of norms, but through situated action within them.

In Islam, infertility or barrenness is not seen as a punishment or a curse, but rather as a test from God. There are several Hadiths and Quranic verses that encourage patience and prayer in the face of such trials. The Quran says: "To Allah ˹alone˺ belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth. He creates whatever He wills. He blesses whoever He wills with daughters, and blesses whoever He wills with sons."[15] (Quran, 42:49).

Polygamy could be regarded as a solution for having more children, as reflected in discussions within various Facebook groups dedicated to the topic. This perspective emerges regardless of whether one spouse is unable to conceive or simply does not wish to have more children, a sentiment frequently highlighted in public group exchanges. A question arose in a Facebook group where a man asked whether polygamy could be justified in a situation where he desired more children than his wife was willing or able to have:

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[15] https://quran.com/ash-shuraa/49

"If your wife firmly decides not to have more than two children, but you, as a man, desire a larger family, how would you handle the situation?"

Out of 32 responses, 19 suggest marrying another woman to fulfil the desire for more children by saying:

"Simply take more wives."

"If the second wife also wants only two children, just like the first, then move on to a third, and if necessary, a fourth—strictly following the provisions for believers."

"Find another wife who is willing to have children with you. End of discussion."

"This is one of the reasons Allah allowed polygamy. Women shouldn't be overwhelmed with childbearing; they too have the right to enjoy life and pursue their careers."

Muslim feminist Wadud (1999), critically examines the justification of polygamy due to infertility. She argues that the Quran does not cite infertility as a valid reason for polygamy. Instead, Wadud suggests that the Quran's permission for polygamy was historically contextual, aimed at providing care for widows and orphans rather than addressing personal desires or societal pressures for more children. She emphasizes that using infertility to legitimize polygamy is unjust and heavily gender-biased.

The concept of using polygamy as a solution for infertility is not explicitly mentioned in the Quran or Hadith. While some cultural interpretations may view infertility as a valid reason for a husband to seek a second wife, this is not explicitly prescribed or mandated in Islamic texts. Islamic jurisprudence often considers specific circumstances when guiding individuals. However, the core principle remains that polygamy is not an automatic solution to infertility but a permissible option under strict guidelines.

### 3.1.3 Negotiating Agency Amidst Psychological Struggles in Polygamous Relationships

The psychological challenges faced by women in polygamous relationships represent a vital area in academic literature. Examining these issues is essential to understanding how women negotiate questions of agency within the unique and often demanding dynamics of polygamous unions.

One of the members of the Facebook group asked if "a husband's decision to seek another wife signifies a diminished love for the first?", which

highlights the personal and emotional complexities of polygamous relationships. While the woman does not offer a clear explanation for her husband's decision to take another wife, she internalizes the situation by directing blame toward herself. This self-blame manifests in feelings of inadequacy, as she questions her own worth and wonders whether she has failed to meet her husband's emotional or practical needs.

Most responses to this question draw heavily on religious principles to justify a man's choice to pursue a second marriage. Some comments highlight the difficulty of finding a good and religious husband, suggesting that sharing a husband could be a practical solution to fulfil the need for companionship and support:

> "Finding a dependable husband is challenging, as good men are rare. Women often seek partners to fulfil their need for companionship and support."

> "Instead of seeing your co-wife as a competitor, try to regard her as a sister in faith. By doing so and practicing patience, you can trust in Allah's promise of reward for the first wife."

Other comments emphasize the values of patience, sisterhood, and mutual goodwill within polygamous relationships. They encourage first wives to see their co-wives as sisters in faith rather than rivals, fostering a spirit of support and unity:

> "Always remember that she is your sister in Islam, and the most virtuous Muslims are those who desire for others the same blessings and happiness they wish for themselves."

> "When practiced in the right way, polygamy can be deeply rewarding and significantly enhance the quality of all the relationships involved."

At the same time, some comments explicitly acknowledge the emotional cost of this moral framing, pointing to the internal tension between religious acceptance and personal suffering:

> "There's a difficult balance between coping with the emotional pain and accepting that polygamy is permissible and a man's right if he has the ability."

The comments above foreground a discursive framework in which polygamy is predominantly justified through religious principles. Within this framing, men's access to polygamy is often articulated as a religiously sanctioned right, while women's emotional responses are redirected toward ideals of patience, acceptance, and moral endurance. As a result, the emotional complexities experienced by first wives are frequently acknowledged only insofar as they can be reinterpreted through religious virtues, leaving limited

space for women to openly contest the situation or centre their own emotional well-being. By presenting polygamy as something that ought to be accepted as divinely permissible, the discourse tends to normalize submission and conformity as appropriate responses. This dynamic reflects a broader tension captured by Butler's concept of gender performativity, whereby individuals repeatedly enact prescribed roles—in this case, the role of the obedient and patient wife. Through such repeated performances, these expectations come to appear natural and self-evident, narrowing the range of responses that can be articulated without moral or religious disapproval.

Butler's perspective reveals how religious conformity in these cases may constrain women's agency by limiting their ability to question or redefine their roles. While the women may accept polygamy as religiously ordained, this acceptance is not necessarily passive. It exemplifies what Butler describes as the constrained negotiation of identity (1990) within dominant frameworks. For instance, by adhering to religious principles of patience and sisterhood, women may find ways to exercise a form of agency that aligns with spiritual virtues. However, this agency remains deeply embedded within a structure that prioritizes male authority and religious justification over personal and emotional reconciliation.

Polygamous relationships in religious contexts reveal a tension between agency and conformity. While values such as patience and acceptance may limit resistance, women still reinterpret these norms through ethical positioning and solidarity, seeking to preserve emotional stability and a liveable sense of self within restrictive frameworks.

At the level of everyday interaction, the online discussions show a dynamic in which emotional support and normative pressure coexist. Empathy and shared understanding are closely intertwined with the reinforcement of religious expectations, creating a space that is simultaneously supportive and disciplining.

On one level, the community provides a space where the participant, who feels unworthy and struggles with her husband's decision to take another wife, can share her emotions and seek validation. Comments by the group of women encourage her to turn inward, explore virtues such as patience, and reframe her painful experience as an opportunity for spiritual growth. By promoting concepts like self-sacrifice and seeing a co-wife as a "sister in Islam," these women aim to uplift the participant's sense of self-worth, offering companionship and solidarity rooted in shared experiences. This underscores the community's role as a form of emotional scaffolding, helping members find personal meaning and maintain a sense of belonging, even within difficult circumstances.

The discussions also highlight a strong focus on religious self-orientation and ethical engagement, reflecting the community's shared prioritization of spiritual growth and adherence to faith-driven values. By emphasizing polygamy as a permissible and divinely sanctioned right, the group comments aim to guide the participant toward finding meaning and purpose within this framework, presenting compliance not as an obligation but as a path to personal and spiritual alignment. Official religious principles such as patience and sisterhood are uplifted as aspirational virtues, encouraging the participant to reflect on her role within her faith and to seek solace in it. This approach fosters an environment where emotional support is intertwined with spiritual encouragement, gently steering individuals toward deeper engagement with their beliefs. Rather than promoting resistance or alternative life trajectories, these interactions support forms of ethical self-formation through which women manage emotional distress and sustain a morally coherent sense of self within existing religious norms.

Women in the community encourage one another to find self-worth and come to terms with polygamy through religious virtues such as patience and sisterhood. This reflects a situated form of religious agency in which faith helps women cope with emotional and social tensions, rather than serving only as a source of conformity. Rather than aiming to change existing structures, these exchanges support women in making sense of their experiences and maintaining a sense of spiritual continuity within Islamic teachings.

Such Muslim feminists as Wadud (1999) and Barlas (2002) provide significant insights into this phenomenon. They emphasize that the Quran's teachings on polygamy should be understood within their historical context rather than as prescriptions for all eras. These scholars advocate for dynamic interpretation, moving beyond patriarchal assumptions towards equitable frameworks grounded in the Quranic justice and compassion. This theoretical framework echoes the interactions within the community. Women are not passively adhering to religious norms but are instead using those norms to define and expand their agency. Through reinterpretations of polygamy practices, they subtly challenge patriarchal structures by grounding their strength and identity in religion itself.

The process of engaging religiously to redefine roles often provides empowerment in ways that purely oppositional strategies might not. For women with a deeply rooted religious identity, viewing their experiences through faith can allow them to reconcile pain and complexity in a way that feels authentic and stabilizing. The framework of religious virtues can create meaning and coherence, ensuring emotional resilience. Rather than perceiving

polygamy and the associated challenges as external impositions, they absorb these as tests of their faith and opportunities for spiritual growth.

Such a strategy can be more effective in this context than outright resistance, as it aligns with their foundational spiritual principles and cultural worldviews. By finding empowerment within religion, these women do not reject their faith but reshape its application to support their dignity and well-being. This is a powerful form of agency—a means of making sense of their realities while preserving and strengthening their connection to their faith and community.

The alternative set of online comments shifts the focus from religious norms to individual growth, urging women to invest in their personal development and self-discovery. By recommending actions like improving one's confidence, addressing flaws, and pursuing self-improvement, these perspectives advocate for empowerment through self-awareness rather than through adherence to religious frameworks. This approach fosters emotional resilience by encouraging women to see their value beyond their role in a polygamous relationship, promoting growth in areas such as mental, emotional, and physical well-being.

> "If you feel there's something missing or lacking in yourself, take steps to improve it! Growth is a lifelong process, and nobody is perfect—we all have our imperfections. Focus on addressing what bothers you, and as you work on it, you'll naturally boost your confidence."
>
> "Work on bettering yourself during his absence, allowing your progress to shine through no matter who else may capture his attention or whom he decides to marry. Focus on your own growth and development."
>
> "A marriage can flourish even after he remarries. Strive to maintain a calm, harmonious environment and take this as your chance to focus on becoming your best self—physically, mentally, and emotionally. If you and the co-wife can work together, support one another, and share responsibilities, it can enhance the experience even more. You'll learn so much about yourself in the process."

These comments inspire a proactive mindset, where challenges are viewed as opportunities for transformation rather than sources of despair. While this strategy contrasts with religious-based guidance centred on faith and communal values, it complements it by addressing the individual's inner world.

The comments illustrate a dual focus where women are encouraged to pursue self-improvement while also maintaining harmony in their marital

relationships. On the one hand, these remarks emphasize personal growth urging women to invest in their mental, emotional, and physical well-being. By building confidence, addressing insecurities, and focusing on self-discovery, they advocate for empowerment as a deeply personal process. This element allows women to reclaim a sense of agency within the limits of their existing circumstances.

On the other hand, the comments also underscore the importance of relational dynamics, particularly in the context of polygamy. They suggest strategies to enhance the marriage, such as fostering peace, being supportive, and surprising the husband with positive changes. While these actions are positioned as beneficial for self-growth, they are also framed to strengthen the marital bond and potentially shift the dynamics within the relationship. The motivation isn't solely self-centred but is also relational, reflecting a desire to maintain and even improve the partnership.

This circumstance bears some similarities to instances of divorce when women begin to prioritize their self-care more (Sakraida 2005; Konstam et al. 2015; O'rand 2005). However, while there are parallels, the events of a divorce in a monogamous marriage and a woman entering a polygamous marriage should not be directly compared. Despite this, it is worth noting that the emotional experiences and letdowns in both scenarios exhibit resemblances.

Going back to Butler's idea of performativity, the actions encouraged in the comments, such as working on appearance or character, align with traditional expectations of femininity as being nurturing, attractive, and accommodating. They suggest that a woman's value within the relationship is, at least in part, contingent upon meeting certain relational and aesthetic expectations. This framing can be seen as perpetuating a performance of gender that upholds patriarchal structures. By striving to "outshine" a co-wife or maintain an edge in the husband's attention, women may feel compelled to conform to specific ideals of what it means to be a "good wife" under these circumstances. This type of performativity emphasizes adaptability and change in response to external validations, reinforcing the dynamics of power and competition often present in polygamous contexts.

Butler's concept of performativity includes the potential for subversion. Even while conforming to established norms, these actions can reflect a form of agency. Women are not passively accepting their roles—they are actively navigating and negotiating them. The process of self-improvement as framed in the comments combines performative acts (e.g., maintaining attractiveness, fostering peaceful environments) with a focus on developing confidence and personal growth. This blend suggests that the women are both responding to

societal pressures and reshaping their identities within these constraints. They selectively use prescribed roles to carve out their own paths toward empowerment, albeit within a circumscribed framework.

What emerges, then, is a tension between conformity and agency. On the one hand, women's efforts to improve themselves to draw the husband's attention reaffirm their position within the existing patriarchy, reinforcing a performative role designed to sustain their relational status. On the other hand, this focus on self-discovery and resilience indicates a reclamation of personal power through improvement. Within Butler's framework, this interplay demonstrates how gender performances are neither purely oppressive nor entirely liberating—they are sites of negotiation where identity and agency are constantly produced and reproduced.

The presence of a co-wife in polygamous relationships often stirs a mixture of emotions, ranging from jealousy and insecurity to resilience and self-reflection. These feelings, while challenging, can become pivotal in shaping how women assert their agency.

In one online comment, a woman shares her thoughts and emotions, revealing her heartbreak and confusion after reading messages between her husband and his second wife, which seemed overly affectionate to her despite his claims that there is no real connection between them:

> "I regretfully went through my husband's messages with his second wife, who lives abroad. Being in polygamy as the first wife for only five months, I've worked so hard on healing. I supported his decision to marry a single mother in need after much prayer and reflection. Recently, he told me he struggles to connect with her and that his kind words to her feel forced, as he always thinks of me. But reading their messages shattered me. I've been unable to eat or sleep, feel irritable with my kids, and break down crying randomly. Joy feels out of reach, and this pain is overwhelming."

Initially, her decision to support her husband's marriage to a second wife can be understood as an attempt to exercise agency. She mentions that she approached this decision with "much prayer and reflection," demonstrating her conscious effort to align her values and actions, even in a scenario that could inherently diminish her autonomy. This act of support was significant—it was not passive submission but rather a choice to prioritize empathy and understanding for both her husband and the other woman, a single mother in need. However, this agency came at a cost.

Her emotional distress from reading the affectionate messages shows how little control she has over her emotions. Even though she chose to support her husband's decision, her efforts to stay emotionally stable started to

crumble when she saw those messages. This highlights her struggle with agency—she is torn between her ideals and the harsh reality of the situation. Discovering her husband's affectionate communication, despite his claims of no connection, makes her feel powerless, overshadowing her efforts to maintain control with feelings of doubt and pain.

Yet, the woman's story also reflects resilience amidst this struggle. By expressing her emotions openly, she demonstrates a form of reclaiming agency—naming her pain, sharing her vulnerability, and acknowledging her symptoms of distress. These are not acts of simple submission, but signals of a person attempting to make sense of her suffering and re-orient herself ethically and emotionally.

As earlier situations show, women suggested being patient or even befriending the second wife. However, in this situation, a new idea emerges— choosing to know as little as possible about the second marriage and what happens in it. This approach aims to avoid jealousy and other negative feelings by staying uninformed about the other relationship:

> "I make it a point to avoid my husband's phone entirely. I even carry earplugs with me in the car and at home to block out conversations I don't want to hear. I prefer to stay in my own peaceful space, reminding myself that Allah knows what is best for me. When curiosity arises, I remind myself of the saying, 'curiosity killed the cat,' and consciously choose to protect my peace."

> "My dear sister, I completely understand where you're coming from, but for your own peace of mind, try to think of his absence as if he's away on a business trip."

> "I always advise my friends to stay away from their husbands' phones. What you find might reveal truths that could break your heart. If you're not prepared to face it or move forward, it's best to leave the phone alone and preserve your peace."

This approach is a conscious effort to protect emotional well-being by avoiding situations or information that might trigger jealousy, sadness, or distress.

Practical steps, such as avoiding the husband's phone entirely and using earplugs to block out conversations, show a deep commitment to maintaining inner peace. These actions reflect a deliberate choice to create a mental and emotional boundary, keeping potential sources of discomfort at bay. This strategy is not about denial but about prioritizing one's own sense of tranquillity in a situation that could otherwise feel overwhelming.

While this strategy can help women cope with immediate emotional pain, it does not address the broader conditions that produce this distress.

Instead of questioning the dynamics of polygamy itself, it focuses on managing feelings and maintaining inner stability within the existing arrangement.

However, the distress may not stem solely from polygamy as a legal or religious arrangement, but from the tension between its normative idealization and the lived emotional realities it produces. In the situation described above, the first wife made the decision to agree to her husband taking a second wife, which suggests an initial acceptance of the arrangement. The emotional distress might stem from a mismatch between her expectations and the reality of living in a polygamous relationship. This highlights the complexity of personal expectations and the challenges that arise when those expectations are not met, emphasizing the need for clear communication and understanding of how such dynamics will impact daily life.

This ongoing process of reevaluating one's emotional limits and adopting strategies of avoidance can be understood as a situated form of agency oriented toward endurance and self-preservation rather than transformation. It reflects adaptive decision-making aimed at protecting personal well-being within an unchanged relational structure.

In another comment, a woman shares her struggle with the emotional weight of polygamy, expressing deep distress whenever her husband visits another woman, and the response offers guidance on acceptance, emotional resilience, and channelling her energy into personal and spiritual growth:

> "One thing I've realized in a polygamous marriage is that sometimes you should live in delusion to a certain extent. Now what done can't be undone. But you can choose how to take it. When he recently talked about treating her better, perhaps the messages you saw reflect an effort to improve their relationship. Allow yourself to believe in this positive change."

> "It's tough—feelings don't just disappear. What you can control, however, is how you react. Shift your mindset, detach emotionally, and focus on yourself and your relationship with Allah. Redirect your energy from him toward your personal and spiritual growth."

> "Sometimes, the key is to accept what you can't change and focus on what you can—your thoughts and actions."

Observing the online group's interactions suggests that the community functions as a space where women collectively develop strategies for coping with emotional distress. Rather than encouraging confrontation or structural change, the advice emphasizes acceptance, emotional regulation, and redirection of attention toward personal and spiritual growth. Agency in this context is articulated through the management of one's reactions rather than

through altering external circumstances. By encouraging women to "choose how to take" the situation, detach emotionally, and focus on what remains within their control, the comments frame agency as a process of reframing, self-discipline, and endurance within an unchanged relational structure.

Acceptance in these discussions does not appear as passive resignation, but as a conscious way of dealing with difficult circumstances. Women are encouraged to recognize what they cannot change—such as the presence of a co-wife—and to focus instead on what remains within their control, particularly their emotional reactions and everyday behaviour. In this sense, acceptance becomes an active choice aimed at preserving inner stability rather than a sign of surrender.

A related form of agency emerges through emotional management. Women are advised to work with their feelings by limiting jealousy, anger, or despair and by redirecting emotional energy toward practices that help them cope. This does not mean that emotions disappear; rather, women engage in ongoing efforts to contain and regulate them. Such practices allow women to continue functioning within polygamous relationships without becoming emotionally overwhelmed, even if the broader situation remains unchanged.

Agency is also expressed through relationships with others. Women rely on shared advice, solidarity, and mutual understanding within the online community to navigate their experiences. Through these exchanges, they learn how others manage similar challenges and adapt these strategies to their own situations. These relational practices help women avoid isolation and support their ability to endure difficult emotional conditions.

The online group itself plays an important role in enabling these forms of agency. It offers a space where women can reflect on their experiences and experiment with different ways of coping, such as limiting access to distressing information, creating emotional distance, or relying on social support. Through these everyday choices, women actively shape how they live with polygamy, exercising agency oriented toward coping and self-preservation rather than toward changing the structure of the relationship itself.

## 3.2 Polygamy in Jordan: Women's Perspectives Through an Ethnographic Lens

### 3.2.1 Perception of Polygamy

This section examines how Muslim women living in Amman, who are either first or second wives or have close ties to polygamous relationships within their families, understand and define polygamy. By looking at their personal narratives, we uncover how these women perceive their roles and construct meaning within the framework of such marriages. Their experiences, shaped by religious beliefs, social norms, and cultural traditions, offer a nuanced understanding of how polygamy impacts their lives and identities. These accounts highlight the challenges and complexities women face, while also pointing to the ways they navigate and adapt to their realities within polygamous marriages. This opens space to reflect on questions of autonomy and self-perception in such settings.

Women interviewed in Amman understand polygamy almost exclusively through the lens of religion, rooted in the teachings of the Quran. Their perceptions are deeply tied to their faith, with many viewing polygamy as a practice permitted within specific guidelines outlined in Islamic scripture:

> "As a Muslim woman, I see polygamy as something that the Quran allows, that is in sharia law, but only under very clear rules and with fairness being a must. It's not about personal happiness alone; it's about responsibility and following what Allah has permitted for specific reasons." (Interview No. 5)

Many interviewees believe that Islam brought structure and fairness to polygamy by introducing specific guidelines that replaced the chaotic practices of earlier tribal systems. These regulations, rooted in the Quran and Sharia law, established clear conditions meant to ensure fairness and protect the rights of women within such arrangements. By emphasizing responsibility, equality, and the welfare of all parties involved, Islamic teachings aimed to create a more just and harmonious social framework:

> "Islam came and put clear rules in place for polygamy, limiting it to a maximum of four wives and ensuring fairness between them. Before Islam, there were no boundaries—men married as many women as they wanted." (Interview No. 7)

During my conversation with an imam in Jordan, he emphasized that Islam played a pivotal role in regulating relationships to safeguard the rights of women and children. According to him, Islamic teachings introduced a structured approach to family life, ensuring fairness and accountability. He

highlighted that these regulations not only protected vulnerable members of the family but also fostered balance and stability within society as a whole.

Some women have pointed out that adultery is an important reason behind the existence of polygamy in Islam. Since relationships outside of marriage are strictly forbidden in Islam, polygamy offers a lawful and morally acceptable way for men to have multiple partners without straying into sinful behaviour. This perspective frames polygamy as a means to uphold moral integrity and adhere to Islamic principles, providing a structured solution that aligns with religious teachings. By formalizing these relationships, men can ensure their actions remain within the boundaries of faith:

> "Marriage in Islam, whether it's to one wife or more, exists to prevent adultery only, it is not about love." (Interview No. 1)
> "The key point is not the number of wives but following Islamic teachings to keep relationships lawful and avoid sin." (Interview No. 5)

Similar arguments were also expressed during informal conversations with local community members in Amman. Several males emphasized that polygamy is viewed as a morally preferable system for preventing adultery, which is considered a serious sin in Islam and, in most Islamic countries, may carry legal consequences. From this perspective, polygamy was contrasted with what they described as western practices, where men may engage in extramarital affairs without formal responsibility. Polygamy, in their view, entails obligation and accountability toward women, rather than temporary or concealed relationships without commitment.

The allowance of polygamy for men in Islam, while women are not permitted multiple husbands, naturally leads to the perception that men may have greater sexual needs or desires than women. This raises questions about how gender roles and expectations around sexuality are constructed and justified within religious and social frameworks, and whether this distinction suggests an inherent difference in sexual needs, or it is more about the cultural and religious framework designed to regulate relationships.

One of the interviewed females reflected on the model of polygamy, considering not only its religious aspects but also the tribal order that prevailed in Arab regions prior to the rise of Islam, as she explained the reasoning behind why men were allowed multiple wives while women were not permitted multiple husbands:

> "Polygamy, in this context, makes sense if you think about how important it is for a child to know their father and the tribe they belong to. When one man has multiple wives, it keeps everything clear—kids know who their dad is, and it preserves the family and

tribe's structure. If women had multiple husbands, things could get confusing, and that connection might be lost." (Interview No. 10)

"Islam protects the community by safeguarding women's dignity and preventing them from being seen as whores, which is why it doesn't allow women to have multiple husbands." (Interview No. 13)

Wadud (1999) has critically examined gendered assumptions that are often used to justify practices like polygamy, particularly those grounded in claims about men's sexual needs. Wadud highlights that such gender-based assertions are not inherently rooted in Islamic teachings but are rather cultural constructions shaped by patriarchal norms. The scholar points out that the interpretations of the Quran have historically been dominated by men, and these perspectives have often been used to sustain unequal power dynamics. For example, the notion that men require multiple wives to fulfil their sexual desires is rooted in a biased understanding that treats women as passive and secondary in marital relationships. According to Wadud, this perspective disregards the Quran's overall emphasis on mutual respect, justice, and spiritual equality between genders.

The perspectives expressed in the comments quoted above draw on historical and cultural frameworks in which lineage and tribal affiliation played a central role in social organization. These comments also reflect a traditional view in which women's worth is closely tied to sexual exclusivity and their roles within the family.

The assertion that polygamy ensures "children know their father and the tribe they belong to" reflects how cultural practices rely on gendered performances to stabilize familial and communal structures. This view assigns men the role of lineage bearers and women the role of ensuring that lineage remains uncontested, tying their worth to their reproductive and sexual exclusivity. From Butler's standpoint, this expectation is not an innate truth but rather a constructed norm that is repeatedly performed by individuals and endorsed by the collective. Women's roles here—as wives and mothers tasked with preserving lineage—can be understood as performances shaped by patriarchal norms, where repeated enactment contributes to the stability of these social structures.

Similarly, the comment that Islam "protects women's dignity by preventing them from being seen as whores" can be read as a performative articulation of moral order. Within this framing, a woman's value becomes closely linked to conformity with a narrowly defined moral code, shaped by dominant religious and cultural interpretations. Such framings tend to associate women's dignity with performances of modesty, chastity, and sexual

exclusivity, positioning these traits as central to their social legitimacy. From Butler's perspective, these repeated performances contribute to the stabilization of gender norms and hierarchies, rather than reflecting inherent or natural differences.

During casual fieldwork conversations, a young man who has been married for just a year shared his perspective on why men can have four wives while women cannot. He used the metaphor, "A good key can unlock many locks, and the opposite – a lock is bad if it can be unlocked by many keys" as a justification. This phrase reflects his view that male sexuality symbolizes strength and utility, likening men to a key capable of opening many locks. Conversely, women, represented as locks, are valued for exclusivity, implying that being "opened" by multiple keys diminishes their worth.

This metaphor reflects a moral hierarchy in which male sexuality is framed as active and expansive, while female sexuality is valued primarily through exclusivity. Rather than functioning as a neutral comparison, such imagery reinforces assumptions about gendered worth and responsibility, placing the burden of sexual restraint and moral respectability primarily on women. Within this framework, women become associated with the maintenance of social and familial "purity," while men's access to polygamy is often justified through biological or social arguments.

One theory suggests that Islam introduced polygamy to reform and limit prior tribal traditions, ensuring men treated their wives equally and capping the number at four. However, conversations with Jordanians also revealed that such explanations are frequently embedded within broader cultural narratives that emphasize male authority and regulate female sexuality. These narratives appear to persist alongside religious interpretations, contributing to the ongoing reproduction of traditional gender hierarchies.

Interviews reveal a deep-rooted acceptance of polygamy, with many women highlighting it as a practice anchored in Sharia law and tradition, asserting its permanence. Despite mentioning examples like Turkey and Tunisia, where polygamy was banned, respondents firmly believe that such changes are not possible in Jordan or similar contexts. Comments below showcase this perspective:

> "We must simply accept it because it is from Sharia." (Interview No. 2)
>
> "It's impossible for polygamy to end here because it goes against religion. There are enough laws to regulate it, and one can refuse if they don't want it." (Interview No. 13)

These views reflect a strong connection between religious identity and cultural practices, making reform efforts particularly challenging. Polygamy

is not only perceived as a divine mandate but also as a system backed by established legal frameworks. This contributes to a sense of inevitability and resignation, which may limit the space for critical conversations about gender equity. All the interviewees, when describing polygamy, maintained that no woman desired it, yet it was a system they were born into:

> "As women, we don't accept it, but as Muslims, we do because it's Sharia." (Interview No. 6)
>
> "It's impossible to do polygamy. One person being in two different houses is impossible. It confuses everyone." (Interview No. 18)
>
> "We were born into this system. I don't like it. I don't want to share my husband, but it's part of our lives." (Interview No. 5)
>
> "Me and my friends would tell our husbands 'I will kill you and your wife'." (Interview No. 7)
>
> "Society doesn't accept it, but if it happens, it happens. Society stays silent and lets it go, especially if it's for religious reasons." (Interview No. 4)
>
> "There isn't a woman in Islam who would accept being a second wife or accept a second wife. But that's how we were born." (Interview No. 17)

The comments reveal a clear tension between personal desires and the obligations imposed by religious and societal norms. While women consistently express emotional rejection of polygamy—indicating personal dissatisfaction—they simultaneously articulate a commitment to Sharia that they describe as unchangeable and central to their identity as Muslims.

Drawing on Mahmood's work, this tension can be understood as reflecting forms of ethical self-perception that do not necessarily involve resistance or transformation of the system. Rather than framing these narratives as purely passive submission, they point to how women negotiate meaning, responsibility, and moral coherence within a framework they experience as given. At the same time, these accounts also highlight the limits of agency, as acceptance often emerges alongside resignation, constraint, and a lack of perceived alternatives.

The statement "Society doesn't accept it, but if it happens, it happens" points to the role of social silence in sustaining polygamy as a normalized practice. Rather than reflecting explicit approval, this silence suggests a collective accommodation in which religious justification takes precedence over open contestation. Within this context, polygamy is embedded not only in individual belief but also in shared moral expectations that shape how dissent is contained or deferred.

Many interviewed women discussed polygamy primarily from a religious standpoint, often expressing limited awareness of the legal rights available to a woman whose husband wishes to marry another wife or has already done so. While most women firmly rejected the idea of sharing their husband, this rejection was frequently framed as emotionally valid but practically irrelevant. As one participant stated:

> "All women will say no to polygamy, but a man don't need to listen for a woman on this matter." (Interview No. 3)

This perception reflects a widely shared assumption that decision-making power in matters of polygamy ultimately rests with men. At the same time, some younger women emphasized that legal frameworks do offer women certain protections and choices. They referred to the possibility of refusing polygamy, seeking legal recourse, or negotiating financial consequences if their consent is ignored:

> "A woman has the right to reject her husband's desire to take another wife." (Interview No. 8)
> "It's crucial for women to be aware of their legal rights in these situations." (Interview No. 6)
> "The law offers strong protections—for example, if a husband marries a second wife without the first wife's consent, he could face significant financial consequences." (Interview No. 13)
> "Women have numerous options if their husbands fail to respect their wishes." (Interview No. 4)

Jordanian laws do provide women with options, including the ability to outline conditions in marriage contracts or seek financial protections through courts if their consent is disregarded. Yet, societal norms often impose heavy pressures, urging women to accept their husband's decisions in the name of tradition or religion:

> "He's your husband; you have to accept it." (Interview No. 5)
> "Husband is your heaven and your hell." (Interview No. 9)

Even from a legal standpoint, women—including those who were aware that it is possible to include specific conditions in a marriage contract, such as a clause restricting a husband's ability to marry another wife—expressed hesitation or rejection of this option. As one participant explained:

> "Including a clause in a marriage contract to prohibit a husband from marrying another wife is seen as haram in Islamic principles." (Interview No. 9)

In Jordan, women have the right to include stipulations in their marriage contracts that can restrict their husband's ability to marry additional wives. The Personal Status Code allows for such provisions, providing women with

a formal mechanism through which they may articulate their preferences and concerns within the marital framework. However, these legal options are often underutilized due to limited awareness and strong societal pressures.

This legal framework stands in contrast to how such contractual stipulations are commonly perceived. As reflected in the participants' accounts, including clauses that limit polygamy is frequently described as *haram* (prohibited by religion). This perception does not indicate the absence of legal mechanisms, but rather highlights how existing rights are interpreted and evaluated through dominant religious and moral frameworks. Although contractual stipulations exist within Jordanian family law, they are often viewed through religious lenses that frame their use as morally inappropriate or illegitimate, thereby discouraging women from exercising these formal rights.

The perception that restricting polygamy in a marriage contract is prohibited by religion reflects the influence of particular religious interpretations in which polygamy is understood as a divinely sanctioned male right. Within this interpretive framework, any contractual attempt to limit that right is viewed as illegitimate, as it is seen to challenge religious authority rather than negotiate marital arrangements. Such understanding does not necessarily derive from the absence of legal provisions, but from moral reasoning that prioritizes perceived divine entitlement over contractual autonomy. As a result, marriage contracts are not experienced as flexible instruments of negotiation, but as documents constrained by religious legitimacy and social expectation.

The Mudawana reforms in Morocco illustrate one approach to how contemporary Islamic law has been reinterpreted within the Islamic legal framework (Weingartner 2004–2005). These reforms introduced significant changes to family law, including stricter regulations on polygamy, making it permissible only under specific conditions and with judicial approval. Furthermore, a man cannot marry another wife without the explicit consent of his current wife, introducing an additional procedural requirement within marriage. In Jordan, the law does not require the consent of the current wife for a man to enter into a polygamous marriage.

There is a noticeable shift among younger women in Amman in how polygamy is perceived compared to older generations. While many older women view polygamy as a divine and immutable right granted to men, something they must accept as part of their religious and social framework, younger women are approaching the issue with a more questioning and legally informed perspective. They are increasingly aware of their legal rights and describe polygamy as a practice that should be approached with an awareness

of their own position and available options. Many young women reject the traditional view that a husband is the central figure in a woman's life, a perception that was widely accepted by previous generations:

> "A husband is not a king anymore in the house." (Interview No. 11)
> "The younger generation is well-aware of their rights and will not allow a man to exploit his position in the relationship around polygamy." (Interview No. 18)
> "We refuse to accept the outdated idea that a husband should be the centre of a woman's entire life." (Interview No. 15)

This growing awareness reflects a tendency among younger women to question traditional expectations while remaining constrained by social and religious frameworks. For these women, understanding their rights is not just about compliance but about ensuring fairness and autonomy in their personal lives.

The refusal expressed by many younger women to accept becoming a second wife, or to conform to expectations they describe as outdated, often sparks conversations that extend beyond individual beliefs. This clash of perspectives naturally draws attention to the broader family and relatives, whose opinions and reactions can vary widely when polygamy enters their circle.

> "Despite a strong unwillingness to accept a polygamous marriage, it often happens because neither the woman nor her family has any real say in the man's decision to take another wife." (Interview No. 15)
> "The family and the woman are firmly against the idea, but they have no power to prevent it and end up having to accept the situation." (Interview No. 14)

One woman described a situation in which parents, when visiting their son and grandchildren, deliberately distanced themselves from the second wife, choosing instead to meet exclusively in the first wife's home. This reflects their discomfort and their preference to uphold their bond with the first wife, while subtly rejecting the second.

Families often strongly oppose polygamous marriages, yet they frequently feel unable to intervene, as legal and religious frameworks grant men the authority to take another wife. This conflict between personal values and societal norms can be deeply painful as it can be observed from the following example: a first wife faced the news that her husband had decided to marry again. When he shared his decision with their children, they voiced their clear disapproval, firmly stating they could not accept it. Despite their objections, their father went ahead with the marriage, leaving his family to grapple with feelings of rejection and helplessness in the face of a situation

they experienced as beyond their control. Some women mentioned that they keep polygamy a secret or avoid discussing it openly to prevent other men in the family from considering or initiating polygamous relationships.

In the context of polygamy and societal norms, Butler's theory suggests that change can occur when individuals and groups begin to question and modify the behaviours and rituals that uphold these norms. Such questioning may take various forms, including moments of hesitation, selective silence, or partial refusal, rather than overt resistance. However, women speaking from experience mentioned that both they and their family members eventually accept polygamy as a fact and stop questioning it. Despite this resignation, some younger women described attempts to establish clearer personal boundaries, particularly by stating in advance that they would not agree to polygamy.

Discussions about societal and family reactions to polygamy revealed another perspective, shedding light on how the husband's family often views it as acceptable and even commendable:

"A second marriage will be celebrated from the husband side." (Interview No. 3)

"Having a second wife is seen as an honour, as it demonstrates wealth." (Interview No. 13)

"A man with multiple wives is praised as it reflects his power, wealth, and success, demonstrating that he is capable of providing for them." (Interview No. 16)

The above quotes emphasize key societal values—wealth, power, and success—as cornerstones in the perception of polygamy, ultimately illustrating a clear hierarchy deeply rooted in cultural norms and expectations.

Polygamy, as reflected in these statements, becomes not just a private relationship decision but a public display of status. A second wife is not portrayed as a supplement to emotional or relational fulfilment but as a marker of financial capability. Wealth here becomes a defining factor in achieving societal respect—almost commodifying the institution of marriage itself into proof of status. By tying honour to material success, these views reveal a cultural landscape where hierarchy is heavily defined by what one owns or can offer, not who one is.

The differing perspectives on polygamy from the point of view of one's daughter versus one's son are deeply rooted in cultural norms and gendered hierarchies. While polygamy involving a daughter is often framed through concerns about fairness, dignity, and emotional well-being, the same practice is frequently normalized or even valorised when it involves a son. Islamic feminist scholars Wadud and Barlas have pointed out that such asymmetries

are sustained through interpretations of religion that prioritize male entitlement and lineage over women's autonomy. In this sense, the contrasting reactions to polygamy do not simply reflect personal preferences, but reveal how gendered moral expectations operate unevenly, reinforcing patriarchal structures within family and kinship relations.

In conversations with men, polygamy was frequently discussed in economic rather than religious terms. Several men emphasized that, regardless of religious justification, most men would prefer to have more than one wife if they had sufficient financial means, framing wealth as the primary condition for polygamy. At the same time, they pointed to the current economic crisis in Jordan as a significant constraint, noting that many men are unable to afford marriage to even one woman, let alone multiple wives. These economic considerations further demonstrate that polygamy operates less as a purely religious practice and more as a privilege shaped by material capacity, where financial means function as the primary condition for its social legitimacy.

The first wife's account reveals contrasting dynamics in how polygamy is perceived and practiced within her husband's family. From the husband's family's perspective, polygamy serves as a symbol of wealth and power, a marker of status that aligns with their belief in reinforcing masculinity through material success. This cultural endorsement from the male family members—many of whom also practice polygamy—demonstrates how deeply rooted these values are in showcasing dominance and affluence.

However, for some men, polygamy appears to be less about emotional relationships or familial responsibility and more about simplifying their personal lives, particularly while traveling. By marrying instead of engaging in extramarital affairs, they frame polygamy as a solution to social and religious restrictions against adultery, framing it primarily as a practical solution rather than as an emotionally grounded partnership. This pragmatic approach raises significant ethical and emotional questions. While these marriages validate the man's social image, they often leave women in insecure positions, often without consistent care or inclusion in the family. Such a transactional view disrupts the family structure, prioritizing male desires over the well-being of their spouses and children, perpetuating inequities rooted in power dynamics and gender roles.

Reflecting on previous findings from the comments of the members of Facebook groups, it becomes clear that men often rely on generalized religious justifications, instead defaulting to a blanket justification that it is Sunnah—a path they have the right to follow. However, interviews with women offer a contrasting narrative, highlighting their perception that the Sunnah is often selectively interpreted:

"I can say that this is the only Sunnah men want to implement, but they look at it superficially." (Interview No. 12)

Another interviewee noted:

"Sunnah is that you *could* but not *should or must* follow this path." (Interview No. 1)

Women's reflections reveal a layered, critical perspective that does not outright reject polygamy as a religious concept but rather interrogates the contexts and motivations driving its practice. This reflects ways in which women exercise agency through critique and moral reasoning within structures often perceived as rigidly patriarchal. By questioning men's prioritization of this single aspect of the Sunnah—sometimes at the expense of other, arguably more essential, principles—they redefine what it means to practice faith responsibly. For example, when women dismiss motivations such as financial showmanship or a pursuit of hedonistic pleasures, they are actively resisting a commodified or self-serving interpretation of religious doctrine. Their critique suggests a demand for deeper alignment between practice and values, emphasizing justice, compassion, and authenticity as foundational to religious ethics.

Agency here emerges not as rebellion but as a form of negotiated engagement with tradition. Women use their agency to engage a theological framework that they inhabit but refuse to passively submit to. They question the tendency to reduce religious principles to cultural norms, emphasizing moral integrity as a key criterion of practice. For instance, the insistence on exceptional justifications for polygamy—situations that truly honour its intended purpose—underscores this conscious navigation of the norm. Women's perspectives highlight processes of reinterpretation and recontextualization through which traditional practices are assessed in relation to ethical and religious ideals, rather than followed through superficial adherence.

This ongoing engagement with polygamy also reveals how women balance submission with critique. While recognizing the legitimacy of polygamy within the system they are born into, their reflective stance on its implementation demonstrates a reflexive and ethically engaged relationship with their faith. By questioning selective interpretations and emphasizing deeper ethical considerations, they contribute to ongoing negotiations over how this practice is understood and evaluated within religious frameworks.

Ultimately, these women illustrate forms of agency that do not reject tradition but engage with it through critique and ethical reflection. Their critique of polygamy's current practice and their emphasis on ethical qualifications reflect a shared desire to honour both individual dignity and

collective moral responsibility. These perspectives suggest that religious traditions, far from fixed or monolithic, exist in dialogue with the individuals who interpret and embody them. Through their reflections, these women challenge us to consider how lived experiences continually reshape and enrich our understanding of religious practices like polygamy.

### 3.2.2 Exploring Women's Motivations for Consenting to Polygamy in Jordan

Polygamy, in certain historical and cultural contexts, has been justified as a means to provide care and protection for widows and orphans during periods of social or economic hardship. Over the centuries, Islamic scholars have reinterpreted and expanded the practice to reflect the changing needs of society, introducing new contexts in which polygamy might be considered permissible. The previous subsection examined women's perspectives, highlighting motivations they question or consider unjustifiable, such as wealth as a basis for supporting additional wives or the pursuit of multiple sexual partners. The current subsection examines contemporary reasons for polygamy and the circumstances under which women consent to becoming second wives or accept additional wives into their families.

In the interviews conducted in Amman, women consistently asserted that they would not want polygamy in their own families, and that it is generally not desired by women. However, they pointed out certain valid reasons when they might agree to polygamy, two main of them being the lack of children/infertility or other illnesses of the woman:

> "From an Islamic perspective, if a man desires to have a family and his current wife is unable to bear children due to infertility, the religion allow for him to marry another wife." (Interview No. 4)

From Wadud's perspective, the Quran does not mention infertility as a justification for polygamy. Instead, the scholar suggests that both barren men and women should still have the opportunity for marriage and the care of children, proposing adoption as a compassionate alternative.

One interviewed woman explained, that imams have broadened and prescribed the justification for polygamy, applying it to various cases beyond the Quran's original guidance. This shift highlights how interpretations have moved away from the initial context outlined in the Quran. Women's infertility became one of the commonly cited justifications for polygamy.

Barlas (2002) and Wadud (1999) point out that infertility is frequently stigmatized as solely a woman's issue, even though there is no scientific

evidence to suggest that women in the MENA[16] region experience infertility at higher rates than men. These assumptions contribute to gendered interpretations of infertility, where responsibility is disproportionately assigned to women. As a result, polygamy is often framed as a solution, despite the emotional strain and ethical tensions it brings, particularly in relation to the Quranic requirement of justice between wives. How fairness can be understood or maintained when one wife is struggling with infertility while the other is married primarily for her ability to bear children. This imbalance exposes the complexities and ethical tensions tied to these interpretations and practices.

Maintaining fairness and equality in polygamous marriages becomes increasingly challenging when one wife has children and the other does not. Such situations create a natural imbalance in the distribution of resources and time. Children, by necessity, require more financial support and undivided attention, which can inadvertently lead to one wife and her family receiving more of a husband's time and money. This disparity adds significant complexity to daily planning and relationship dynamics.

Women who discuss this topic often stress that equality between wives should be strictly upheld, meaning the time and finances allocated to each wife must be the same. However, they are adamant that children must be treated as a separate matter, acknowledging their unique needs. For example, during one conversation, a woman explained that if one wife has children, the husband may need to dedicate specific days or times solely to the children without it being viewed as an extension of his time spent with the wife. This ensures that fairness is maintained between the wives, yet the children are not neglected. Such arrangements, while seemingly fair, involve demanding levels of coordination and emotional sensitivity.

From one perspective, it seems inherently unfair for a husband to marry another wife simply because his first wife cannot meet societal expectations of childbearing. This practice places undue pressure and blame on the first wife, treating her worth as a partner solely in terms of her ability to have children.

However, as one female interviewee pointed out, there could be another way to view this situation:

> "Polygamy can be advantageous for a woman and the whole family and a woman who dreams of having a family and kids but can't have them herself." (Interview No. 13)

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[16] MENA refers to the Middle East and North Africa, a commonly used regional term in academic literature.

Another woman added to this idea by comparing it to practices found in non-Islamic communities:

> "Polygamy is often seen as a way to have children, similar to surrogacy, but instead of paying money, a new wife becomes part of the family." (Interview No. 12)

Women may choose polygamy as a means to fulfil their desires for family and children, exercising agency by navigating and negotiating their roles within the cultural and religious frameworks that shape their lives.

This choice can be understood as a way in which women seek to actively engage with their familial and social environments under constrained conditions. By engaging with the structures of polygamy, women articulate their desires and aspirations, seeking forms of alignment between personal goals and broader cultural and religious expectations. This perspective complicates portrayals of women as merely passive within patriarchal system, highlighting their ability to make strategic choices that reflect their values and aspirations.

From Butler's perspective, the concept of religious agency within polygamy could be interpreted as both enabling and constraining for women, reflecting the inherent contradictions of exercising agency within pre-existing systems of power. While women may actively engage in shaping their roles and asserting their desires for family and children within the bounds of religious frameworks, this process does not necessarily dismantle the underlying patriarchal structure that governs these systems.

Religious agency can enable forms of strategic action within cultural and spiritual contexts, while operating in an environment where ultimate authority often remains male-dominated. For example, even when a woman seeks to fulfil her aspirations by consenting to polygamy or facilitating the inclusion of another wife into the family, the decision-making power—whether to agree, proceed, or finalize the arrangement—typically resides with the husband.

Critically, while discussions of religious agency may emphasize women's capacity to act within constraints, they can risk obscuring the structural inequalities that underpin those constraints. This paradox—where agency is expressed through submission to a framework that limits it— can be understood through what Butler describes as the "paradox of subjectivation" (1997) whereby subjects are formed through the very systems that constrain them. Women's ability to seek meaning and purpose in an act like polygamy does not dissolve the broader asymmetry of power. Rather, it exposes how deeply gendered hierarchies remain embedded within religious and cultural systems.

Even in cases where a woman is fertile, polygamous dynamics are often framed as granting men the authority to marry additional wives if they wish to expand their lineage further:

> "If a man simply wants more children, Islam permits him to marry again, as long as he meets the condition of justice among his wives." (Interview No. 8)

Some women acknowledge that while the desire for more children might not be the most ideal reason for polygamy, it is seen as justified under certain conditions. If a man has the means to adequately provide for both his wives and children, the choice to marry additional wives in pursuit of a larger family is often regarded as his rightful decision within this framework.

From conversations with Jordanians, one man described a cultural perspective rooted in religious belief, stating that, according to a hadith of the Prophet Muhammad, believers were encouraged to "have as many children as possible." This stems from the belief that a larger *ummah*, or community of believers, will hold greater significance on Judgment Day. This idea reflects not just a religious duty but also a source of pride in contributing to the growth and strength of their community. This perspective underscores how religious teachings deeply influence social and family structures in Jordanian culture.

In addition to the subject of having children, the topic of a woman's illness or disability is also often discussed as a valid reason for polygamy. During a conversation with a Jordanian man, he explained that if a wife were unable to fulfil certain marital duties due to illness or disability, a husband would be allowed to marry a second wife to ensure, as he described, a healthy and functional relationship. This approach is seen as advantageous for women, which he contrasted with what he described as western societies, where, in his view, a woman facing such challenges might be at risk of divorce or abandonment: "Instead of leaving his sick wife, Islam obligates the husband to continue caring for her, even if he takes another wife." In his opinion, such a system allows him to maintain his marital commitments while also addressing practical needs.

One female interviewee shared a story illustrating the compassionate side of polygamy. She recounted a situation involving a husband whose first wife developed Alzheimer's. To ensure proper care for his ailing wife, he chose to marry a second wife, not out of desire, but as a means to provide additional support and help in managing the first wife's well-being. The second wife played an instrumental role in caring for the sick wife, highlighting how polygamy, in this particular case, was understood as rooted in care and practical considerations. This example highlights a unique

application of polygamy within this cultural and religious framework, where it becomes a system of support rather than abandonment.

Speaking of polygamy as a system of support, it becomes clear that the reasons women engage in polygamy are significantly more complex than those of men. While men often justify polygamy by highlighting practical needs, such as having more children or avoiding adultery to remain faithful—women's explanations reveal deeper ties to societal structures and expectations.

For many women, agreeing to or seeking polygamy isn't strictly due to personal desire but is shaped by the social framework within which they live. Several women have noted that polygamy sometimes provides a form of security. For example, being part of such an arrangement may ensure their financial stability, enhance social standing, or offer a stronger support network. This is particularly important in communities where marriage solidifies a woman's role and status within society:

> "For a woman from a poor family, becoming a second wife can be an opportunity for a better life. This offer often means gaining a home and a family, something she might not otherwise have. Her decision is driven by the hope for improved living conditions and greater stability compared to her current situation." (Interview No. 13)

Another woman adds:

> "Woman is not accepting polygamy, she is refusing it, but at the same time she is refusing, she wants to survive and live. So she accepts this situation." (Interview No. 11)

During our discussions, several women redirected the question of polygamy asking me what I would do if I were in their place. I responded honestly, stating that it was difficult for me to understand polygamy because it was not practiced in my cultural context and was commonly perceived as a form of betrayal, and therefore I would choose divorce. This exchange highlighted the cultural distance between my own normative assumptions and the realities these women described. One woman responded thoughtfully, saying, "As a woman, it doesn't matter if you are Muslim or not—we all have the same feelings, and negative emotions arise for all of us considering polygamy."

Furthermore, during these discussions, many women pointed out that the acceptance of polygamy was closely tied to financial factors. They emphasized that agreeing to such arrangements often depended on the conditions a woman was facing and the level of her financial independence.

For example, one woman explained why she accepted becoming a second wife:

> "After divorce, I didn't want to go back to live with my parents at their house, but I wasn't financially independent and wanted to have more children." (Interview No. 14)

In her *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Mahmood explores how economic hardship shapes the decisions women make within cultural and religious boundaries. She highlights that women in restrictive situations often adopt strategies that align with societal and religious norms, not necessarily as passive acceptance, but as practical choices shaped by the conditions of their lives. These decisions, such as taking on traditional roles at home or participating in religious practices, are often driven by financial stability and the desire to support their families.

Mahmood also emphasizes the importance of religious teachings in these choices. Women use religious values to balance their practical needs with their ethical and moral beliefs. For example, they might see decisions like entering a polygamous marriage as a way to secure financial support while fulfilling their spiritual and familial roles. These actions, while shaped by external pressures, involve thoughtful consideration and reflect ways in which practical and spiritual concerns are negotiated together. Mahmood's work shows how women creatively navigate their challenges, demonstrating resilience and adaptability within the limits of their cultural and economic realities.

Among the many stories shared, I have heard women describe this choice as a way to seek financial stability, particularly when becoming a second wife. One woman described it as follows:

> "To become stable financially, this is why some women agree to be a second wife. They don't look for a new man because they believe being the second wife makes them seem better or more loved in comparison. They want to hear that the first wife is lesser or bad. It boosts their self-esteem and proves they are better." (Interview No. 6)

This perspective highlights a competitive dynamic, where the second wife seeks validation by comparing herself to the first wife.

However, during my stay in Jordan, I encountered situations that complicated this narrative, specifically, some men, rather than providing financial stability, instead exploited their wives financially. A first wife shared how she had worked hard to establish a business for her husband. But, instead of showing gratitude, the husband married another woman without her consent

or valid justification. He broke her trust by taking a second wife behind her back.

Another story involved a second wife who had been divorced and longed for a complete family and the chance to have more children. She entered a polygamous marriage, agreeing to join her husband's family with the blessing of the first wife. However, her husband married her not out of love or the desire for a larger family but because she had financial resources. She ended up paying for his child's expenses from the first wife. For as long as she provided financial support, he kept her in the household. But once she refused to continue covering these costs, the husband alienated her.

The prevailing belief often paints women who become second wives as those seeking financial stability—whether out of necessity, by marrying into wealth, or due to difficult life circumstances. This assumption ties closely to societal norms that frame women within roles where their financial well-being depends on male support. However, the interview accounts also reveal a contrasting and less-discussed dynamic, in which men, rather than acting as providers, exploit their wives' financial resources.

In addition to financial security, women also pointed out age as an important factor shaping decisions to become a second wife:

> "Sometimes women choose polygamy because they're getting older and feel like there aren't many other options." (Interview No. 13)
> "It's hard for older women or widows to find an unmarried man, so they go for what's available." (Interview No. 9)

In the Middle East, including Jordan, the cultural emphasis on marrying young is significant. It is deeply rooted in societal norms where marrying at a younger age is often seen as ideal. Such practices are influenced by various factors, including social expectations and the desire to secure a stable future (Singerman 2007).

Youth often plays a pivotal role in defining a woman's perceived validity and suitability for marriage in certain cultures. Societal norms often place considerable pressure on women to marry at a young age, linking their worth and respectability to marital status. For unmarried women, societal judgment can be harsh. One interviewee described it like this:

> "When a woman is unmarried, people don't view her positively. It's as if she's no longer valid or worthy of consideration. Polygamy might then become an option for her to find security within society. For divorced women, the situation can be even more complicated. There are often rumours about her character—questions of whether she did something wrong. If she isn't financially independent, she has very limited options. She may struggle to earn a livelihood

because of the same rumours, and the fear of losing her children may leave her feeling trapped." (Interview No. 2)

This account illustrates how cultural expectations surrounding age, morality, and marital status intersect with financial dependency, significantly narrowing women's perceived options and intensifying pressure to accept polygamy.

Butler's concept of the paradox of subjectivation provides a useful lens for examining how societal norms surrounding marriage and polygamy shape women's choices. The paradox, as Butler explains, lies in the way norms both subordinate individuals and simultaneously create the conditions for their agency. Applied to these accounts, this perspective suggests that women become subjects through the very norms that constrain them. For example, the societal belief that youth determines a woman's validity for marriage positions women in a subordinate role by reducing their worth to their marital status. These norms dictate that an unmarried or divorced woman's identity is tied to the perceptions of inadequacy, deviance, or failure, leaving her vulnerable to negative societal judgments and economic insecurity.

Yet, within this framework of subjection, women are still able to make choices within the limited options society allows. Polygamy, as the interviewee explained, can emerge as a pragmatic solution—a way to seek protection, respectability, and financial stability when independence is not a socially or structurally viable route. By participating in polygamous relationships, women conform to and reinforce the same norms that marginalize them, such as the primacy of male protection or the stigma against single women. However, through this conformity, they also secure a sense of agency, ensuring survival and social acceptance within an oppressive system. Butler's theory sheds light on the duality of this dynamic, illustrating that action and self-positioning are never exercised in a vacuum but always within the constraints of social power.

It is not the case that half of all marriages are formed due to social survival or financial incentives. People also get married for love. However, people are often constrained by cultural traditions and even legal restrictions, and as they follow these norms, they may sacrifice their love for the sake of tradition. However, by using those very same religious rights, they may steer their lives in the direction they truly desire.

For example, a Jordanian woman shared a story about her brother, who married a second wife. Although she and the rest of the family did not support this decision, the details of the situation revealed how the motivations of the man and his second wife were understood within the family:

"My brother married his first wife not out of love but because our mother had suggested her as a good match. You could say she found him a wife, but he never truly loved her. The second marriage happened because my brother and this other woman genuinely loved each other. Our family did not approve of this second marriage, and to this day, we don't have much of a relationship with his second wife. But what can we do? Over time, we've learned to live with it." (Interview No. 6)

During my ethnographic fieldwork conversations in Amman, one man working in other Arab countries mentioned that in Qatar, a man's first wife must necessarily be Qatari. Consequently, if a man falls in love with a non-Qatari woman, he might marry a Qatari woman solely to later marry the woman he loves. However, upon verification, this information does not appear to be legally accurate. Qatari men who wish to marry non-Qatari women are required to receive permission from the Marriages Committee. This indicates that while it is possible for a Qatari man to marry a non-Qatari woman, there are additional bureaucratic steps involved.

This could be said to be a survival mechanism too, a way for both women and men to express their agency while navigating within the boundaries of societal expectations, adapting and enduring within the framework of complex laws and traditions. This reflects an ongoing negotiation between upholding tradition and pursuing personal happiness. However, even if two people find love and see polygamy as a solution, what happens to the first wife? She was already married, and as we've understood from earlier reflections, divorced women—especially those with children—often face significant challenges in finding a new family. They are left behind, forced to carve out their own strategies for survival and resilience in the face of these hardships.

Not every survival strategy centres around the presence of a husband. For some women, entering a polygamous relationship becomes one way of navigating social and economic vulnerability, while for others it reflects attempts to improve their position within family life. One of the interviewed women laughed and said:

"I'd agree to be a fourth wife at most, because that way I'd get support and wouldn't have to see the husband too often—he wouldn't get on my nerves or bore me." (Interview No. 3)

Another woman, the second wife, shared how life improved for both her and the first wife after the marriage:

"When I joined the family as the second wife, things really changed for the better. The first wife and I divided the responsibilities, and it

made life so much easier for both of us. We finally had time for ourselves, even to enjoy outdoor activities, which we never really had before. Before I came into the picture, there had been a lot of conflicts in the family, but after the marriage, everything became so much more balanced. Honestly, life improved not just for me but for the first wife too, and everything just fell into place naturally. I never felt any pressure from society—it all felt right." (Interview No. 10)

As discussed in Section 1.4, many scientific studies on polygamy tend to focus on the emotional struggles women face in such relationships, often highlighting the negative impact on their health and self-esteem as they feel diminished in these dynamics. These challenges are well-documented, and my interviews confirm that polygamy is often one of the least desired circumstances for Muslim women. However, the interviews also reveal perspectives in which polygamy is not described solely in relation to the husband.

For many women, the focus shifts to their own pursuit of happiness and creating a collectively balanced family life. Rather than fixating on "sharing a husband," they may find ways to cultivate personal satisfaction, harmony within the family, and a sense of stability. Through these choices, women describe ways of organizing family life that allow them to seek personal satisfaction, stability, and a sense of balance. This reframing highlights how polygamy, while challenging, can sometimes lead women to reclaim their inner contentment and autonomy.

These accounts illustrate how women navigate social expectations and personal aspirations within the constraints of existing societal frameworks.

## 3.2.3 Emotional Struggles and Societal Perceptions Across Polygamous Relationships

Many women reluctantly accept polygamy, framing it as both a religious right for men and an ingrained societal norm they are compelled to adapt to. For some, agreeing to such relationships serves as a survival mechanism, driven by financial constraints and societal expectations that make life without a husband and family unbearably challenging. Yet, it begs the question if life truly become easier in polygamous marriages. As seen in the example above, sharing daily responsibilities can indeed open pathways to greater autonomy, allowing women more time to focus on themselves and their individual pursuits. However, this is not a universal narrative. Society's response to women in polygamous relationships is multifaceted, often

oscillating between pity, judgment, or quiet acceptance, depending on cultural or communal norms.

Navigating these dynamics often involves emotional endurance and a situated awareness of social frameworks, as women attempt to negotiate their roles, sometimes exercising limited forms of agency, while simultaneously contending with the layered complexities of societal scrutiny and uneven support structures. This interplay underscores their nuanced existence within these relationships, revealing both the strain and subtle strength in balancing personal aspirations with societal realities. In this subsection, we will further explore how society and the environment react to women in polygamous relationships.

In my conversations about how society or family views the second wife in a family, they always began with similar statements:

> "No one in the family likes the second wife. But they accept because it's how it is, it's the world they live in, and they can't do anything about it." (Interview No. 1)
> "She is not loved." (Interview No. 11)
> "Second wife is a trouble wife, ruining first wife's house." (Interview No. 4)

Second wives in polygamous marriages often carry the heavy burden of societal and familial judgment, as they are largely perceived in a negative light. They are frequently viewed as unwelcome intruders, stepping into homes that were never theirs to begin with and, in doing so, are accused of dismantling the peace and harmony within the family. The prevailing narrative paints them as destroyers of existing relationships, with blame for family discord often laid squarely on their shoulders.

Yet, despite this resentment, their presence is reluctantly accepted, often justified by the norms and traditions of the society they live in. For these women, the emotional toll can be profound—they are not only navigating the complexities of their relationships but also battling the stigma of being seen as the cause of unhappiness and division. As one woman noted:

> "A woman marrying another woman's husband is like stabbing a woman to the back, second wife brings a lot of emotions to the first wife. Second wife is like a bacterium which causes sickness in the family and first wife." (Interview No. 4)

The contrasting perspectives on second wives in polygamous marriages reveal a significant societal tension. On the one hand, some narratives frame becoming a second wife as a survival strategy. For many women, particularly in socio-economically challenging contexts, this choice is rooted in necessity rather than desire. Economic dependence, marginalization of single women,

and limited opportunities make such arrangements appear as a practical, albeit difficult, response to constrained circumstances. Historically, religious frameworks have validated these decisions, framing polygamy as a means of providing security to widows or marginalized women.

On the other hand, there is a deeply entrenched narrative portraying second wives as "homewreckers" or disruptors of family harmony. This raises a natural question: why does such a negative perception persist toward second wives when it has been acknowledged that many women enter these marriages not out of privilege, but as a means of survival? In the words of one woman:

"You are marrying a man who is already married. It's a sin."
(Interview No. 1)

The statement holds a fascinating contradiction that reveals layered cultural and religious complexities. On one level, this appears contradictory within certain religious frameworks, such as Islam, where men are granted the right to marry up to four wives under certain conditions. These guidelines are often deeply rooted in historical and socio-economic contexts, emphasizing justice, care, and equity among wives. From this perspective, a woman's decision to become a second or third wife is not inherently sinful but framed as permissible within certain religious interpretations. However, this comment likely reflects a societal bias that moralizes women's decisions while largely absolving men of similar scrutiny. Second wives are scapegoated as the cause of familial discord, while the structural gender inequalities enabling polygamous arrangements remain unquestioned. This dynamic is fuelled by patriarchal norms, where women are placed in competition, and the second wife is deemed an outsider threatening the system.

The term "sin" in this judgment seems less about religious doctrine and more about cultural narratives that attach shame to behaviours not aligned with monogamous ideals. Despite religious allowances, societies may still frame the second wife as morally questionable, reflecting a tension between tradition and evolving values.

This apparent contradiction exposes the uneven moral expectations placed on women versus men. The comment highlights that, although allowed in theory, polygamy operates within a system that deeply scrutinizes women's roles and decisions. It underscores how societal attitudes often interpret and apply religious teachings in ways that sustain patriarchal frameworks, ultimately marginalizing women who agree to roles that scripture, in theory, sanctions.

Finally, this situation raises the questions: where is the man? Why does his role and responsibility in this context seem to be ignored or simply overlooked? When I asked women about this, the answer was as follows:

"Oh yes, the man is indeed the main problem creating this situation (ed., the woman is laughing)." (Interview No. 9)

From subsequent discussions, it appears that women often perceive men's decisions to take a second wife as lacking convincing or widely accepted justification.

"It's clear that men often want more wives purely because of their own desires. It's not always about logic or necessity—most of the time, it's just them wanting to satisfy cravings or fantasies." (Interview No. 18)

"I think some men see marriage as a way to get more of everything—more sex, more attention, more excitement." (Interview No. 17)

"When a man feels unsatisfied with his wife, instead of addressing the actual issues, he just looks for a new one, thinking she'll somehow fix everything." (Interview No. 6)

These decisions are frequently attributed to factors such as sexual desire, passion, and the pursuit of something perceived as better or more fulfilling. Consequently, there is a tendency not to assign full blame to men, framing their actions as driven by impulsivity or unrestrained desires. However, it is also suggested that women may exercise certain forms of agency within these dynamics, sometimes being perceived as influencing men's decisions or shaping the relational context in which such choices are made.

"Sometimes, men really are victims in these situations. The second wife can manipulate things, painting the first wife in a bad light and using her charm to win him over. It's not always about the man's desires—sometimes he's just caught in a web of her influence." (Interview No. 13)

"Second wives often know they will be favoured—getting more love, attention, and financial support from the husband. Many use this to their advantage." (Interview No. 16)

Furthermore, when viewed from a religious standpoint and considering the "valid reasons" commonly cited for a man to remarry—such as the inability of the first wife to have children or her being seriously ill—no such justification was evident in the cases discussed during interviews. Whether the perspectives came from first wives, second wives, or women speaking about acquaintances with experience in polygamous marriages, none of these accounts provided instances where the husbands' decisions to take another wife were founded on these accepted or traditional reasons.

The idea that second wives seek more love, attention, and financial support shows how some women attempt to navigate and make sense of their

situation. Far from being passive participants, women adapt to and even challenge the structures of polygamy, leveraging their roles to achieve personal goals or reshape the power dynamics of marriage. This mode of resistance, grounded in piety and self-cultivation, demonstrates the nuanced ways in which women employ religious principles while also questioning and transforming restrictive practices.

The paradox of subjectivation, where individuals become both constrained by and empowered through societal norms, becomes visible in these narratives. Men, seemingly the decision-makers, may themselves be constrained by cultural or religious expectations to take multiple wives, enacting a privileged yet limiting role. Women, on the other hand, oscillate between submission and strategic agency, as reflected in narratives that describe the second wife as employing charm or influence to navigate her position within the marriage. Both genders' identities and actions are shaped by these societal scripts, revealing how power and subjugation are intricately interwoven within the performative framework of polygamous marital systems.

Negative attitudes toward the second wife often arise from deep-seated sentiments and loyalties connected to the first wife, reflecting an emotional struggle to reconcile past bonds with present realities:

"She got something she doesn't deserve." (Interview No. 9)

This sentiment arises from the view that the first wife is often regarded as the one who stood by her husband from the very beginning, sharing in his struggles and triumphs as he worked to build a life, establish a family, and grow into the person he is today. Her presence is tied to the foundations of his journey, embodying years of shared experiences, sacrifices, and milestones that shaped both their lives:

"It's not just about the fact that her husband married someone else—it's the pain of watching her go through this after all she's sacrificed for him and their family. And yet, when he reaches a more comfortable stage in life, instead of cherishing her, he seems to forget everything she did. It's just so unfair." (Interview No. 13)

"He forgot the women who stood by him in tough times. The first wife was the one who struggled alongside him, building a life from nothing. The least they deserve is respect and appreciation." (Interview No. 16)

The comments highlight the emotional and financial inequities faced by a first wife who invested heavily in building a marriage and shared struggles with her husband. When another woman enters the relationship, she is often seen as benefiting from the first wife's sacrifices, like emotional effort and

financial stability. This perception amplifies feelings of injustice, as the first wife's contributions seem overlooked, especially as she endured the hard times only to be left behind when success and comfort are achieved. These dynamics evoke strong sympathy for the first wife, as well as frustration over the apparent lack of appreciation for her role. As one woman puts:

> "They say that if a mother-in-law doesn't love the first wife, only then will she agree to and be happy about the second wife. Once, a friend of mine, even though she didn't have children, was still loved by her mother-in-law, and the second wife wasn't accepted." (Interview No. 12)

In the context of polygamy, agency can be understood not only in terms of individual choices, but also about how these choices are perceived, valued, and respected within the broader societal and relational frameworks. Agency involves the capacity to act and make decisions, but it is also shaped by societal norms and expectations. In polygamous relationships, a first wife's agency may be retrospectively interpreted as residing in her participation in building a shared life with her husband. However, when another woman enters the relationship, the first wife's agency can be overshadowed by societal narratives that may view her as having "lost everything." This perception can diminish the intentionality behind her sacrifices, reducing her to a passive victim rather than an active participant.

In their narratives, some first wives describe efforts to resist being positioned solely as victims, instead seeking to reinterpret their roles and experiences. Whether such attempts are recognized or supported depends heavily on how their actions are perceived, valued, and legitimized within familial and social contexts.

For example, many younger Jordanian women mentioned that they rejected the traditional family hierarchy model and refused to see the man as the head and sole provider of the family. Instead, they focus on their own education and self-improvement so they can later be independent and capable of supporting themselves—and, if needed, their family and children.

One woman, who was a second wife, spoke about her children, stating:

> "I will absolutely not allow my daughters to get married until they complete their education and secure their independence and future." (Interview No. 11)

These responses reflect hypothetical positions articulated by women whose understanding of polygamy is largely shaped by observation rather than direct experience:

> "My friends and I would undoubtedly request a divorce." (Interview No. 7)

"He's an unbalanced person from the start if he decides to marry another woman. If you want to marry someone else, first divorce your current wife. If you don't love the first enough and feel the need for a second, then just end the marriage." (Interview No. 8)

"If there's no valid reason, like illness or infertility, then without question, I'd divorce him. It would mean he doesn't love me anymore." (Interview No. 9)

Agency is not only about the choices an individual makes but also about how society perceives and reacts to those choices. When a woman makes a decision to prioritize her education, independence, or her vision for the future, the way society interprets and responds to this choice plays a crucial role in reinforcing—or diminishing—her sense of agency. For example, when such decisions are socially recognized or legitimized, they may contribute to a stronger sense of self-efficacy and continuity in women's self-perception. This recognition bolsters her confidence and encourages her to continue making decisions that align with her aspirations. It shows that she is seen as capable, strong, and self-reliant. Such acceptance creates an environment where more women feel empowered to take control of their lives and think independently.

Conversely, if society views her choice with pity or disapproval—interpreting her independence as a failure to conform to traditional expectations—it can undermine her progress. Earlier in this section, we discussed the societal tendency to expect women to marry at a young age and the stigma that often follows those who deviate from this norm. If a woman remains unmarried, she may face judgmental questions about what is wrong with her because she is not yet married. Similarly, if a woman divorces, the reaction might shift to doubts about her worth or suitability, with whispered assumptions, such as that something is wrong with her because her marriage did not last.

These perceptions can be hurtful and constraining, as they frame a woman's value in terms of her marital status rather than her character, achievements, or personal choices. This kind of societal scrutiny can discourage women from prioritizing their independence or leaving unhealthy relationships, trapping them in restrictive narratives that undermine their agency.

However, the younger generation is often described as articulating alternative understanding of independence and gender roles. This transformation is further reinforced by the reflective contributions of the older generation, whose lived experiences sometimes lead them to reflect critically on past constraints and to articulate alternative ways of understanding women's roles and responsibilities. These generational dynamics illustrate

shifting and sometimes competing interpretations of agency, rather than a linear expansion of it. Rather than eliminating societal bias, these shifts reshape how women negotiate expectations and articulate agency, positioning it as a contested and evolving concept shaped by recognition, negotiation, and constraint.

While changes are evident, in more conservative and older age groups, with whom I mostly engaged, these processes unfold significantly slower. Women in these groups remain quite dependent on their families and husbands, as the collected interview data clearly reveals. This perspective is particularly evident in connection with the issue of divorce:

"You have to find a solution without divorce." (Interview No. 13)

"The worst of halal (i.e. allowed) thing is divorce." (Interview No. 9)

"A life without a husband could be miserable." (Interview No. 10)

One interviewed woman told that she and her husband had not communicated for about six months during a period of conflict, leading him to marry a second wife; despite being financially independent with her own businesses, she chose to stay in the marriage solely for the sake of their many children.

The interviews showed that a significant number of women opted to sever emotional connections with their husbands while maintaining the formal marital bond. This decision stemmed from a range of motivations. For some, the choice was deeply rooted in religious principles. While divorce is permissible (halal) in Islam, it is viewed as the least favourable option, and individuals are encouraged to consider all possible alternatives. For these women, the alternative often meant simply ceasing communication with their husbands.

For others, the decision was described as a way of maintaining leverage within the marriage. By preserving the marital status, they ensured their husbands remained financially obligated to support them and the other wife, all while refusing to engage with their husbands personally. These women permitted only interactions involving the children, further emphasizing their emotional disengagement.

Furthermore, for some women, financial difficulties played a pivotal role in their decision. The prospect of self-sufficiency seemed daunting, particularly when balancing the responsibilities of raising children and managing household needs. Maintaining the marital relationship ensured a stable source of financial support, which often proved essential for their own and their children's well-being.

A recurring theme in conversations with women was their apparent acceptance of the realities they inhabited. They often expressed dissatisfaction with their circumstances, articulating frustration or disappointment, yet spoke of the necessity to adapt and move forward. At first glance, this narrative feels heavy with resignation—a portrayal of women acting under highly restrictive conditions, where agency is difficult to recognize or articulate. It paints a picture of individuals navigating societal and personal constraints, where options for action are limited and often oriented toward endurance rather than overt challenge or change.

Yet, one may ask if there could be any subtle traces of agency beneath this "veil of acceptance." One interviewee stated:

> "If you wish to marry someone else, do so, but release me from you."
> (Interview No. 1)

In this context, the word "release" does not signify a desire for divorce. The woman is not asking to end the marriage; rather, her use of "release" reflects a wish for freedom from the husband's involvement in her daily life. It signifies a request for him to focus on his other wife, leaving her to live independently and on her own terms. Similar sentiments were expressed by other informants, reiterating a desire for personal space within the constraints of marital arrangements:

> "He is free to marry another, as long as he continues to fulfil his financial responsibilities to the family. Personally, I no longer need him in my life, and he can choose to be with his other wife."
> (Interview No. 18)

Many interviewees in this context articulate a form of emotional detachment from their husbands, where the bond of partnership transforms into a more practical arrangement. Physical divorce is unnecessary as long as the husband upholds his financial responsibilities to the children and the family. Yet, these women no longer see value in the romantic or emotional connection with their spouse. This perspective echoes sentiments shared by one of the women, who expressed willingness to be a fourth wife, viewing such a role as a way to minimize the demands of daily interaction and emotional labour associated with her husband. It reflects a nuanced understanding of autonomy, where respect for personal space and emotional well-being takes precedence within the framework of societal and familial obligations.

In these narratives, women describe a shift in focus away from their husbands and toward managing their own lives and responsibilities. A woman's value is no longer measured by her marital status or the mere fact of having a husband. Instead, they emphasize creating a fulfilling life within the

context of their present circumstances. Their attention is directed towards cultivating their personal growth, managing their own affairs, and maintaining a deep connection to their faith. This orientation is often articulated through references to personal responsibility, religious devotion, and emotional endurance.

The stories of these women illustrate efforts to navigate life within the constraints of societal expectations and polygamous relationships. These accounts suggest forms of agency expressed through endurance, boundary-setting, and selective disengagement rather than overt resistance. In environments shaped by patriarchal norms, women describe prioritizing faith, personal responsibilities, and emotional distance as ways of managing complex relational dynamics. Taken together, these narratives complicate dominant understandings of agency by showing how it is enacted in subtle, non-confrontational ways that do not necessarily seek to transform social structures.

These narratives resonate with strands of Muslim feminist scholarship that emphasize lived ethical practices and everyday negotiations over abstract textual reinterpretations. Rather than articulating feminism as an explicit ideological stance, the women describe ways of managing marriage, faith, and personal boundaries that prioritize moral endurance, responsibility, and limited forms of autonomy within existing religious and social frameworks. In this sense, their experiences contribute to broader discussions on Muslim feminism by illustrating how agency may be enacted through accommodation, selective disengagement, and ethical self-fashioning rather than overt resistance or confrontation.

Taken together, these narratives invite a reconsideration of how agency, autonomy, and value are understood within polygamous contexts, highlighting the importance of examining women's lives beyond rigid normative frameworks.

### 3.2.4 Concluding Remarks

This section aims to summarise and conceptually assess the main patterns of women's action that emerged during the empirical research, drawing on the theoretical literature discussed in the previous chapters. It is important to emphasise that the two empirical components of this study are not intended for mutual comparison. The virtual ethnographic research and the ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Jordan are not constructed as two equivalent or opposing empirical spaces whose purpose would be to identify

similarities or differences. Rather, these parts of the study perform different but complementary analytical functions: the virtual space allows for the examination of women's discursive reflections, moral evaluations, and self-reflexive reasoning, while the ethnographic fieldwork situates these insights within a concrete social, economic, and cultural context. In this section, these empirical insights are brought together not for the purpose of comparison, but to conceptually assess how women's critique, action, and decision-making are shaped within normative religious and social structures, and what limits and possibilities of agency they reveal.

Muslim feminism as a theoretical approach, developed by scholars such as Wadud and Barlas, offers a normative perspective in which women's agency is linked to the reinterpretation of religious texts, the critique of patriarchal interpretations, and an effort to rethink the religious normative system itself. Within this approach, a critical engagement with religion is considered a key precondition for broader social and moral change.

The empirical data of this study indicate that women's experiences do not fully correspond to this normative ideal. In both the virtual ethnographic research and the ethnographic fieldwork in Amman, Jordan, women consistently criticise the selective and instrumental use of religion, particularly men's failure to fulfil their obligations and violations of the principle of justice. In this respect, the object of critique aligns with the position articulated by Muslim feminists.

The essential difference emerges not in the content of the critique, but in its direction and consequences. In the empirical material, women's critique does not lead to what normative theory would expect. It rarely develops into a reinterpretation of religious norms or a theological project, but instead remains part of everyday moral reasoning and practical decision-making. Women do not question Islam as a religion, nor do they define their experiences in feminist terms.

Nevertheless, the empirical data show that women's actions are not limited solely to emotional or moral adaptation. In some cases, women adopt practical strategies of action, such as consciously seeking financial independence, postponing marital decisions, or emphasising the need to prioritise self-care. However, these strategies are not articulated as resistance to religion or to the patriarchal normative system. Rather, they reflect pragmatic action within existing norms, aimed at reducing vulnerability and maintaining moral and social legitimacy.

Accordingly, Muslim feminism in this study emerges as a normative theoretical perspective whose expectations only partially correspond to women's empirical experiences. This mismatch between normative

theoretical expectations and empirical material raises the question of why women's critique most often remains within normative frameworks.

In this study, Butler's theory is employed to describe the normative field within which women's experiences are shaped in a patriarchal system. It helps to elucidate how marriage, motherhood, and the ideal of the "good wife" function as socially and morally institutionalised frameworks upon which women's recognition, security, and value depend. In the empirical material, these frameworks do not appear as freely chosen norms, but as practically unavoidable conditions of life. In this way, Butler's perspective demonstrates that women's critique takes place within normative frameworks and relies on the same structures of meaning that sustain the system itself, which is why it rarely develops into a direct questioning of that system.

In this context, the question arises as to whether women's actions are limited to adaptation to existing norms, or whether it is nevertheless possible to speak of certain forms of agency.

The empirical material makes it possible to articulate a concept of religious agency that, in this study, manifests not through the questioning of religion, but through the construction of a moral orientation. Neither in the virtual ethnography nor in the ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Jordan do women seek to reconsider the religious normative system or its theological foundations. However, this does not imply passivity or complete adaptation. On the contrary, women actively operate within religious norms, using religion as a meaningful and ethical point of reference that helps them navigate everyday situations that are often unequal and emotionally demanding.

In this study, religious agency manifests as the ability to assign moral meaning to situations that women cannot control and to orient their actions according to religious criteria even under unequal structural conditions. In the empirical material, this becomes evident, for example, when women interpret polygynous relationships or a husband's emotional and physical absence as a "test from Allah" and understand patience as a conscious moral choice rather than passive resignation. In these situations, religion functions as an everyday guide that enables women to reflect on their experiences, regulate emotions such as jealousy or anger, and make decisions that help maintain inner stability.

This form of action is not directed toward the rejection or transformation of religious norms. On the contrary, women often emphasise efforts to "act correctly" in religious terms even when, in their own assessment, other family members or spouses do not adhere to these principles. In this way, religious agency in this study appears as self-formation

within religious frameworks of meaning rather than as an attempt to transcend those frameworks.

This perspective aligns with Mahmood's approach, which understands agency not as resistance or emancipation, but as the everyday effort to live ethically within existing religious norms. The data show that women's agency in this context takes place within normative frameworks rather than being directed toward changing them.

Such forms of action make it possible to move from the question of how women act in everyday practice to the question of how this action can be conceptualised from the perspective of agency. At this point, Archer's theory of reflexive agency allows to identify the forms of women's action which is summarised in the study within a broader theoretical context.

Archer's perspective makes it possible to demonstrate that agency can exist even when action does not lead to the transformation of norms or structural change. The empirical material shows that women continuously reflect on their situation, assess possible trajectories of action, and make decisions within the context of constraining structures. This is evident, for example, in the conscious pursuit of financial independence, the setting of emotional or physical boundaries in relationships, the decision to limit involvement in the husband's everyday life, or "not to know" certain details in order to maintain inner balance. Although these decisions remain adaptive and do not alter the normative system itself, they indicate purposeful and reflective action.

In this way, Archer's theory provides a basis for understanding why the religious, moral, and practical forms of action discussed in this study can be considered forms of agency, even when they do not exceed the boundaries of the normative system. Here, agency manifests not through the transformation of structures, but through reflection, decision-making, and conscious action within existing conditions.

# CONCLUSION

Polygamy in Islamic contexts is a complex and multifaceted issue, encompassing historical, legal, social, and psychological dimensions. Rooted in specific historical and socio-economic circumstances, its contemporary practice reflects the interaction between religious teachings, cultural traditions, and modern societal norms. Although Islamic teachings permit polygamy under certain strict conditions, particularly emphasizing fairness and equality, its interpretation and practice vary considerably across different communities.

This dissertation examines both the structural and emotional dimensions of polygamous marriages, with a particular focus on women's agency. Through the lens of Islamic feminism, it explores how women engage with, reinterpret, and at times resist the norms surrounding polygamous relationships, and assert their autonomy within the frameworks of faith and tradition. By foregrounding women's lived experiences, the study offers insight into shifting gender dynamics and highlights how agency can be expressed within complex religious and social contexts.

1. Polygamy is deeply connected to women's identity and autonomy, shaped by the intersection of historical, legal, social, and psychological factors.

Historically, polygamy emerged from social structures to address issues such as male mortality in warfare, widowhood, and economic insecurity. While these origins were often functional within their historical contexts, the practice largely positioned women within patriarchal frameworks, emphasizing their roles as dependents or caregivers rather than autonomous individuals. The literature reflects women's limited  decision-making capacity, reinforced by gendered power asymmetries.

From a legal perspective, regulatory frameworks such as Jordan's Personal Status Law seek to govern polygamy by emphasizing fairness and financial responsibility. However, existing scholarship highlights the lack of consistent enforcement mechanisms, including the standardized assessments of financial capacity or effective penalties for contractual violations. As a result, women often remain vulnerable to unequal treatment, and have to rely on subjective judicial interpretations while facing social and economic barriers to the pursuit of legal redress.

Socially, polygamy is embedded within cultural and religious expectations that position women as bearers of familial and moral stability. Research suggests that women's awareness of their social position—shaped by factors such as education and economic independence—can either restrict

or expand their ability to negotiate their marital arrangements. While some women are able to assert conditions or reject polygamy, others, particularly in more traditional contexts, experience limited room for negotiation due to entrenched societal norms.

Psychologically, the literature consistently documents heightened emotional distress among women in polygamous marriages, including feelings of jealousy, marginalization, and diminished self-worth. These emotional challenges are often compounded by social stigma and limited support structures, that increase women's vulnerability over time. Nevertheless, existing studies also indicate that women may navigate these constraints through culturally and legally available strategies, thereby illustrating the complex interaction between compliance and negotiation within religious and social frameworks.

2. The integration of agency theories and Islamic feminism provides a comprehensive conceptual framework for understanding the multi-dimensional experiences of Muslim women in polygamous marriages.

Islamic feminism, grounded in the Quranic principles of justice and equality, offers a critical framework for challenging the patriarchal interpretations of religious texts. Scholars such as Wadud and Barlas propose alternative interpretation of the Quran that emphasize ethical responsibility, justice, and gender equality. By situating Quranic verses on polygamy within their historical and social contexts, they demonstrate that these practices were originally linked to a concern for social justice rather than the legitimization of patriarchal privilege. This perspective establishes a theologically grounded basis for rethinking women's roles in marriage and society within Islamic thought.

Agency theories further deepen this analytical framework by addressing how women act within, rather than outside of, constraining social and religious structures. Archer's theory of reflexivity is particularly central in this regard, as it conceptualizes agency as an ongoing internal dialogue through which individuals evaluate their social circumstances, priorities, and the scope for action. Archer's approach allows agency to be understood not as a fixed capacity, but as a dynamic process shaped by the interaction between structural constraints, cultural norms, and personal concerns. This perspective is especially relevant when analysing women's decision-making in polygamous marriages, where choices are often negotiated within complex moral, relational, and material conditions.

Mahmood's concept of ethical self-cultivation complements this view by highlighting how women may consciously inhabit religious norms as

expressions of moral agency rather than passive compliance. Her framework challenges dominant western assumptions that equate agency solely with resistance, and instead emphasizes the ethical and spiritual dimensions of action. Butler's notion of performativity further enriches this analysis by drawing attention to the subtle, iterative ways in which norms may be negotiated, re-enacted, and occasionally reconfigured over time.

Taken together, Islamic feminism and agency-oriented theories—particularly those of Archer, Mahmood, and Butler—form a coherent conceptual framework for examining women's lived realities in polygamous marriages. Islamic feminism anchors critiques of inequality within theological and cultural discourses, while Archer's reflexivity highlights women's internal negotiations and decision-making processes, and Mahmood and Butler illuminate the ethical and performative dimensions of action. This integrated framework moves beyond simplistic binaries of resistance versus submission and provides a robust theoretical foundation for interpreting women's agency as it emerges in the empirical material.

3.      Ethnographic research:

3.1. The Facebook group interactions reveal how women in polygamous marriages exercise agency across emotional, social, and religious dimensions.

Emotionally, participants openly share experiences of jealousy, grief, and insecurity, often framing these emotions as spiritual trials. This religious framing allows women to manage emotional distress by attributing meaning to their experiences, fostering resilience and emotional endurance within their faith-based worldview.

Socially, the Facebook group functions as a support network where women exchange practical advice, offer solidarity, and share strategies for preserving emotional well-being, such as limiting exposure to triggering content. Through collective discussion, participants articulate shared concerns, normalize emotional struggles, and negotiate an alternative understandings of their marital roles.

From the religious standpoint, group discussions reflect active engagement with Islamic teachings, particularly through questioning the selective application of practices such as polygamy. Women invoke broader ethical principles of justice and fairness, and while these reflections are not framed as formal theological reinterpretations, they resonate with the concerns highlighted by Islamic feminist scholarship regarding the ethical limits of polygamy.

Viewed through Mahmood's concept of ethical self-cultivation, these interactions illustrate that adherence to religious norms does not necessarily

signify passive compliance. Instead, women's narratives reveal deliberate, reflective engagement with faith as a means of navigating complex family dynamics. In discussions concerning relationships with co-wives, some participants describe a gradual reframing of polygamy as a strategy for achieving specific familial or spiritual objectives, such as shared childcare responsibilities or ensuring a religious upbringing for their children. These practices highlight how women negotiate religious norms in ways that align with their personal values and lived realities, thereby asserting agency within the moral framework of their faith.

3.2. The ethnographic study of women in polygamous marriages in Jordan highlights how agency is exercised within religious, social, and personal constraints.

Religious teachings, embedded in Islamic law and local cultural traditions, function as both a moral framework and a space for ethical negotiation. Many women describe polygamy as religiously permissible, frequently referring to the Quranic principles of fairness and equity. At the same time, they critically assess how these principles are applied in practice, questioning selective or superficial interpretations. Rather than openly opposing religious norms, women engage with them through moral reasoning, using religious language to evaluate lived inequalities.

Socially, women's narratives point to pragmatic strategies shaped by familial, economic, and societal expectations. These include negotiating shared childcare and redefining everyday responsibilities as ways to maintain balance and a degree of autonomy within existing social arrangements.

On a personal level, many women describe emotional recalibration, shifting focus away from marital attachment toward faith, personal well-being, and family responsibilities. In some cases, cooperation with co-wives emerges as a practical arrangement that reduces conflict and supports emotional stability.

Generational differences further nuance these findings. Older women more often frame polygamy as a fixed social and religious reality to be managed, while younger women emphasize education, independence, and personal boundaries. These patterns underscore agency as a context-dependent and relational process rather than a uniform form of resistance.

It is important to note that this study does not aim to represent the experiences of all Muslim women or all women in Jordan. Rather, the virtual ethnographic component offers insight into broader discursive patterns through which Muslim women articulate agency in online spaces, while the ethnographic research conducted in Amman, Jordan, reflects context-specific

expressions of agency shaped by local social, religious, and relational dynamics.

The virtual ethnographic study and the ethnographic research conducted among Muslim women in polygamous marriages in Amman illustrate the diverse and context-dependent ways in which women express agency by navigating religious and social expectations. Across both settings, women demonstrate deliberate and often strategic engagement with their circumstances, seeking to maintain a sense of autonomy while remaining embedded within cultural and spiritual frameworks that are meaningful to them.

Rather than positioning their actions as overt resistance, women frequently engage with Islamic principles—such as fairness and justice in polygamy—as moral reference points through which they evaluate their experiences and relationships. Social dynamics further emerge as important sites of agency, as women describe pragmatic practices such as negotiating shared responsibilities, drawing on co-wife relationships as support structures, or prioritizing education and self-development. Together, these findings suggest that women's agency in polygamous marriages is articulated not in opposition to religious or social frameworks, but through reflective and adaptive engagement with them, contributing to a strengthened sense of self within complex and often constraining contexts. This perspective is particularly important in the study of polygamy, as it underscores that women's agency and empowerment must be understood within the framework of their own ethical commitments and value systems.

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# QUESTIONNAIRE

**Block 1. Perceptions and legal aspects of polygamy**
1. How do you define polygamy, and what does it mean to you personally?
2. How is polygamy understood through a religious lens, and how does this influence your perception?
3. What are the reasons for accepting or rejecting polygamy on a personal level?
4. How is polygamy perceived by society, and is it generally accepted among women in your community?
5. What purpose does polygamy serve today, and do you believe it is necessary in modern society?
6. Are there any legal regulations or protections for women involved in polygamous marriages?

**Block 2. Religious and personal reasons for polygamy**
1. What are the religious reasons for practicing polygamy, and how do they differ from societal reasons?
2. Are the motivations for polygamy solely religious, or do they vary between religious and societal contexts?
3. What reasons do men have for entering into polygamous marriages?
4. What motivates women to become second wives, and do first wives have reasons for accepting polygamy?
5. What are the perceived advantages of polygamy for women and men?
6. Are there any negative aspects associated with polygamy for those involved?

**Block 3. Societal views and emotional challenges**
1. How does society generally perceive polygamous marriages, and what are the common attitudes towards first and second wives?
2. What societal norms and traditions influence the acceptance or rejection of second wives in polygamous marriages?
3. How do societal biases shape the moral judgments of women's decisions in polygamous marriages?
4. How does society perceive men who choose to take a second wife in a polygamous marriage?
5. What emotional challenges do first wives face when their husbands enter into polygamous marriages?

6. How do first and second wives cope with feelings of jealousy or betrayal in polygamous relationships?

## SANTRAUKA

Poligamija – tai santuokinė praktika, kai asmuo vienu metu gali turėti kelis sutuoktinius. Poligamija skirstoma į poliginiją (kuomet vyras turi kelias žmonas), poliandriją (kai moteris turi kelis vyrus), ir grupinę santuoką, kurioje santuokiniais ryšiais yra susiję keletas vyrų bei moterų. Poligamijos ištakos siekia senovės civilizacijas ir yra siejamos su tam tikromis socialinėmis ir kultūrinėmis praktikomis. Senovės Babilone poliginija buvo siejama su socialiniais ir ekonominiais poreikiais, tokiais kaip gyventojų skaičiaus reguliavimas (Khatun, Islam 2023). Nors Graikijoje ir Romoje vyravo monogamija, elito atstovai kartais sudarydavo poligininës sąjungas, siekdami sukurti politinius aljansus ar užtikrinti paveldėjimą savo palikuoniams (Scheidel 2009). VII a., atsiradus islamo religijai, šios mokymai leido poligamiją, tačiau apribojo praktiką griežtomis sąlygomis, siekiant užtikrinti lygybę tarp sutuoktinių.

Senovėje poliginija buvo gana pragmatiškas sprendimas socialiniams, ekonominiams ir demografiniams iššūkiams spręsti (Larsen 2023). Pavyzdžiui, kai dėl didelio vyrų mirtingumo karo laikotarpiu atsirasdavo demografinis disbalansas, poliginija padėdavo jį kompensuoti užtikrindama, kad našlės ir jų vaikai turėtų šeimoje vyrą, kuris ją finansiškai aprūpintų, kadangi moterys įprastai buvo finansiškai priklausomos nuo vyrų, todėl našlėms buvo sunku išgyventi savarankiškai. (Ember ir kt., 2007).

Prieš aptariant poligamiją islame, tikslinga paaiškinti terminijos pasirinkimą. Terminas „poligamija" dažniausiai vartojamas akademinėje literatūroje, ir  taip pat šį terminą dažniausiai vartojo šio tyrimo informantai – „Facebook" grupės nariai ir Jordanijos sostinėje Amane gyvenančios moterys. Dėl šios priežasties, toliau šiame darbe rašydama apie poliginiją islame (kai vyras gali turėti iki keturių žmonų), pasirinkau naudoti bendresnį terminą – poligamiją.

Islame poligamija, kaip vedybinė praktika, minima Korane – vyrui leidžiama turėti iki keturių žmonų su sąlyga, kad jis su jomis elgsis teisingai ir vienodai, pabrėžiant jo atsakomybę prieš žmonas (Koranas 4:3). Istoriškai ši santuokos forma buvo skirta spręsti konkrečias, dažniausiai socialines problemas, pavyzdžiui, būtinybę finansiškai aprūpinti našles ir našlaičius (Beddu 2023). Laikui bėgant kultūriniai, socialiniai ir ekonominiai veiksniai lėmė skirtingas šių religinių mokymų interpretacijas ir darė įtaką tam, kaip poligamijos praktika buvo taikoma skirtinguose kontekstuose.

Šiandien musulmoniškose šalyse poligamijos normos yra įtvirtintos islamo teisėje, tačiau palaipsniui keičiamos siekiant atliepti šiuolaikines vertybes, tokias kaip lyčių lygybė ir moterų teisės. Pavyzdžiui, Jordanijoje ir

Maroke vyras gali turėti kelias žmonas tik įrodęs savo finansines galimybes vienodai aprūpinti jas ir bendrus vaikus, o Indonezijoje reikalaujama kitų žmonų sutikimo norint sudaryti dar vieną santuoką.

Vis dėlto moterys, gyvenančios poligaminėse santuokose, dažnai susiduria su sudėtinga šeimos dinamika, reikalaujančia didelio emocinio atsparumo ir gebėjimo prisitaikyti. Moterys turi rasti būdą suderinti asmeninius norus ir lūkesčius su žmonos bei motinos vaidmenimis santuokinėje sistemoje, kurioje sprendimų priėmimo galia dažniausiai priklauso vyrui.

Islamiškose santuokose sutuoktiniai dažnai sudaro santuoką jaunane amžiuje – dalis moterų, ištekėdamos anksti, netenka galimybių siekti išsilavinimo ar įgyti profesinės patirties, todėl lieka ekonomiškai priklausomos nuo vyrų. Ši finansinė priklausomybė stiprina vyrų valdžią šeimoje ir įtvirtina tradicinius lyčių vaidmenis, ribodama moterų veiklumą bei didindama jų pažeidžiamumą santuokos krizės ar skyrybų atveju.

Šiuolaikinėje mokslinėje literatūroje poligamija islame dažnai pristatoma moterų teisių ir lyčių lygybės kontekste, pabrėžiant moterų patiriamus sunkumus ir nelygybę. Tačiau į moterų padėtį poligaminėse santuokose nereikėtų žvelgti vien iš jas subordinuojančios perspektyvos – svarbu atkreipti dėmesį į tai, kaip moterys, gyvenančios tokiose santuokose, siekia prisitaikyti, išreikšti save ir rasti įsigalinimo formas, leidžiančias išlaikyti, keisti ar formuoti naujus vaidmenis tiek šeimoje, tiek visuomenėje.

Šiame darbe angliškas terminas *agency* verčiamas kaip įsigalinimas, nes jis leidžia apimti ne tik patį veiksmą ar aktyvumą, bet ir subjekto santykį su galia, normomis bei moralinėmis struktūromis. Terminas veiklumas labiau akcentuoja aktyvumo aspektą, tačiau nepakankamai atspindi *agency* teorinį turinį, susijusį su gebėjimu veikti esant socialiniams, kultūriniams ir etiniams apribojimams. Todėl šiame darbe pasirenkamas terminas įsigalinimas.

Šios disertacijos tyrimas susideda iš dviejų dalių, siekiant išsamiau išnagrinėti ir atskleisti tiriamąją problemą. Pirmoji dalis – virtualios etnografijos tyrimas, vykdytas uždaroje „Facebook" grupėje, vienijančioje musulmones iš viso pasaulio, esančias poligaminiuose santykiuose. Antroji dalis – etnografinis tyrimas Amane, Jordanijoje, atliktas su jordanietėmis moterimis, kurios pačios gyvena ar gyveno poligaminėse santuokose arba turi artimųjų, gyvenančių ar gyvenusių tokiose santuokose.

Šio tyrimo tikslas yra ištirti, kaip musulmonės moterys, gyvenančios poligaminėse santuokose, formuoja ir išreiškia savo įsigalinimą islamiškų religinių normų ir visuomenės lūkesčių kontekste.

Šiame tyrime keliamos dvi pagrindinės hipotezės. Pirma, musulmonės, gyvenančios poligaminėse santuokose, įsigalina veikdamos religinių ir socialinių lūkesčių kontekste, siekdamos išlaikyti ir įtvirtinti savo veiklumą.

Kita hipotezė teigia, kad religinis ir socialinis kontekstas gali būti pasitelkiamas kaip moterų įsigalinimo erdvė, leidžianti naujai apmąstyti tapatybę ir santykį su tradicinėmis normomis.

Tyrime analizuojama, kaip poligamija veikia moterų gyvenimo patirtis ir jų vaidmenis šeimoje bei visuomenėje, atsižvelgiant į poligaminės praktikos keliamus iššūkius ir moterų veikimo galimybes įsigalinimo kontekste. Toks požiūris leidžia poligamijos praktiką islame vertinti ne tik per struktūrinius apribojimus, bet ir per moterų veikimo galimybes.

Tyrimo tikslai:

1. Atlikti tyrimų, aprašančių musulmonių moterų, gyvenančių poligaminėse santuokose, patirtis, literatūros analizę, siekiant nustatyti, kaip šios patirtys atspindi ir formuoja tapatybės bei įsigalinimo sampratas religinių ir socialinių lūkesčių kontekste. Analizėje bus apžvelgiami istoriniai, teisiniai, socialiniai ir psichologiniai poligamijos aspektai bei jos poveikis moterų teisėms.

2. Kritiškai išanalizuoti teorines prieigas, nagrinėjančias įsigalinimo ir islamo feminizmo temas, siekiant suformuoti konceptualų pagrindą, kuris leistų interpretuoti moterų patirtis religiniuose ir kultūriniuose kontekstuose. Ši teorinė prieiga jungia islamo feminizmo idėjas su įsigalinimo sampratomis, leidžiančiomis analizuoti moterų veikimą, etinę laikyseną ir jų santykį su socialinėmis bei religinėmis normomis.

3. Atlikti musulmonių moterų įsigalinimo raiškų poligaminėse santuokose analizę, sutelkiant dėmesį į tai, kaip jos supranta, išgyvena ir laviruoja savo santykiuose. Šis tikslas apima asmeninių pasakojimų ir interneto grupėje užfiksuotų diskusijų analizę, siekiant atskleisti pasikartojančias temas, susijusias su emociniais, socialiniais ir religiniais aspektais.

Tyrimas vykdomas dviem etapais:

3.1. Pirmame etape atliekamas virtualios etnografijos tyrimas, kuriame analizuojamos musulmonių moterų „Facebook" grupės dalyvių patirtys poligaminėse santuokose. Šiame etape siekiama ištirti, kaip moterys virtualioje erdvėje suvokia, aptaria ir reflektuoja poligamijos praktiką. Šis etapas svarbus tuo, kad leidžia įtraukti skirtingas moterų perspektyvas, neapsiribojant socialiniais, rasiniais ar geografiniais veiksniais, ir taip atskleisti bendresnes musulmonių moterų patirtis bei požiūrius į poligaminius santykius.

3.2. Antrasis etapas – etnografinis tyrimas, atliekamas Amane, Jordanijoje, tiriant moteris, turinčias tiesioginės arba netiesioginės patirties su poligamija. Tyrimas apima tiek pirmąsias, tiek antrąsias žmonas, taip pat moteris, kurių šeimose egzistuoja poligaminių santykių atvejai. Šio etapo tikslas – surinkti išsamesnius duomenis apie konkrečias moterų patirtis ir išanalizuoti, su kokiais iššūkiais moterys susiduria poligaminėse santuokose bei kokios įsigalinimo galimybės išryškėja jų patirtyse.

Kartu šie etapai leidžia analizuoti tiek bendresnes, tiek individualias poligaminių santuokų patirtis skirtinguose socialiniuose ir kultūriniuose kontekstuose.

Šis tyrimas pirmenybę teikia pačių moterų perspektyvai ir patirtims poligaminių santykių kontekste. Skirtingai nei daugelis ankstesnių akademinių darbų, kuriuose daugiausia akcentuojami neigiami poligamijos aspektai – paklusnumas, lyčių santykių disbalansas ar psichologinis diskomfortas, – šiame tyrime dėmesys sutelkiamas į tai, kaip moterys prisitaiko ir veikia šiuose santykiuose. Šio tyrimo naujumas siejamas su pastanga peržengti tradicinį požiūrį į poligamiją kaip tik ribojantį reiškinį ir analizuoti ją kaip kontekstą, kuriame gali formuotis įvairios įsigalinimo raiškos.

Siekiant išsamiai atsakyti į tiriamąjį klausimą, šiame darbe yra taikomi virtualios etnografijos ir etnografinio tyrimo metodai. Šių metodų derinimas leidžia analizuoti tiek globalias moterų patirtis virtualiose bendruomenėse, tiek gilesnes, vietos kultūros ir visuomenės niuansus atskleidžiančias įžvalgas Amano kontekste.

Prieš pradedant tyrimą „Facebook“ grupėje, buvo gautas administratorių leidimas naudoti grupės turinį akademiniais tikslais, bendrauti su grupės dalyvėmis ir skelbti įrašus. Tyrimas vyko laikantis etikos standartų – dalyvių tapatybės buvo anonimizuotos, o citatos suredaguotos taip, kad nebūtų įmanoma identifikuoti asmenų. Viso tyrimo metu buvo užtikrintas dalyvių privatumas ir konfidencialumas.

Pirmojoje tyrimo dalyje taikomas virtualios etnografijos metodas. Šis metodas leidžia analizuoti internetines kultūras ir bendruomenes bei suprasti, kaip žmonės tarpusavyje bendrauja, kuria tapatybes ir suteikia prasmę savo veiklai virtualioje erdvėje. Virtuali etnografija pritaiko tradicinius etnografinius metodus skaitmeniniam pasauliui ir suteikia galimybę tyrinėti kultūrines bei socialines sąveikas internete.

Vienas iš pagrindinių virtualiosios etnografijos privalumų – galimybė tirti kultūras ir bendruomenes, kurios egzistuoja tik internetinėje erdvėje. Tai padeda analizuoti, kaip skaitmeninės technologijos formuoja socialinius ryšius ir kultūrines praktikas (Tolbert, Johnson 2019). Tyrėjas gali stebėti

duomenis ir sąveikas realiuoju laiku, o tai suteikia galimybę dinamiškai analizuoti internete vykstančius socialinius reiškinius (Coleman 2010). Virtuali etnografija leidžia tyrinėti globalias, geografiškai išsisklaidžiusias bendruomenes ir analizuoti, kaip skirtingų šalių žmonės mezga ryšius skaitmeninėje erdvėje, o anonimiškumo sąlygos kartu skatina dalyvių atvirumą aptariant jautrias temas (Grijalva 2021; Hampton 2017).

Pirmoji tyrimo dalis buvo vykdoma 6 mėnesius. Tyrimo metu buvo dalyvaujama ir stebima privati „Facebook" grupė, vienijanti skirtingose pasaulio šalyse gyvenančias musulmones, esančias poligaminiuose santykiuose arba besidominčias šia tema. Tyrimo metu bendravimas vyko anglų kalba, taikant sinchroninius (gyvi pokalbiai žinučių formatu) ir asinchroninius (komentarai ir įrašai „Facebook" grupėje, diskusijų gijos, privačios žinutės) bendravimo būdus.

Buvo taikomi du stebėjimo būdai: pasyvus stebėjimas, apimantis grupės veiklos sekimą, įrašų, komentarų ir reakcijų skaitymą bei pokalbių tono analizę; ir dalyvaujantis stebėjimas, kuris apėmė aktyvų dalyvavimą diskusijose – įrašų skelbimą, reagavimą į kitų komentarus, atsakymų teikimą ir klausimų uždavimą. Tai leido geriau suprasti bendruomenės kultūrą ir dinamiką iš vidinės (*emic*) perspektyvos.

Buvo išanalizuota apie 500 įrašų anglų kalba – diskusijų gijos, komentarai ir atsakymai, atrinkti pagal jų aktualumą ir atitikimą tyrimo klausimui ir uždaviniams. Pagrindinis dėmesys buvo skiriamas poligamijos kaip religinės praktikos suvokimui ir dalyvių asmeninių pasakojimų analizei, siekiant identifikuoti pasikartojančias patirties ir veikimo temas.

Antroji tyrimo dalis vyko 2024 m. birželį – buvo atliktas etnografinis lauko tyrimas Amane, Jordanijoje, siekiant suprasti šiuolaikinę poligamijos sampratą tiesiogiai bendraujant su vietinėmis moterimis. Tyrimas apėmė 18 pusiau struktūruotų interviu su jordanietėmis moterimis, gyvenančiomis Amane – pirmosiomis ar antrosiomis žmonomis, taip pat moterimis, kurių artimoje aplinkoje yra ar buvo poligaminių santuokų.

Interviu buvo struktūruoti pagal temines gaires. Iš pradžių dalyvėms buvo užduoti bendri klausimai apie tai, kaip jos suvokia poligamiją. Toliau buvo klausiama apie jų pačių ar artimųjų patirtis poligaminiuose santykiuose, apimančias tiek teigiamus, tiek neutralius ar neigiamus aspektus. Galiausiai buvo aptariama, ar poligamija vis dar laikoma funkcionalia ir reikalinga šiuolaikinės visuomenės dalimi.

Interviu papildė ir neformalūs pokalbiai su vietiniais, informančių artimaisiais, giminėmis, vaikais. Šie pokalbiai suteikė papildomo konteksto, padėjo geriau suprasti socialinius ir kultūrinius veiksnius, formuojančius požiūrį į poligamiją.

Tyrimas grindžiamas etnografiniu metodu, leidžiančiu įsigilinti į kultūrinius ir socialinius reiškinius per dalyvaujantį stebėjimą ir tiesioginį kontaktą su tiriama bendruomene (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007).

Buvo pasirinkti pusiau struktūruoti interviu, nes jie leido aptarti tyrimui reikalingas temas, kartu paliekant erdvės temoms, natūraliai iškylančioms pokalbio eigos metu. Šis metodas leidžia lanksčiai reaguoti į pokalbio eigą ir daryti jai įtaką (Bernard 2011; Spradley 1979). Surinkti duomenys buvo transkribuoti ir analizuojami, taikant teminę analizę pagal Clarke ir Braun (2006) modelį.

Visas šis tyrimas yra vykdomas laikantis mokslinių tyrimų etikos gairių. Tyrimui buvo gautas Vilniaus universiteto Filosofijos fakulteto ir Azijos bei transkultūrinių studijų instituto mokslinių tyrimų etikos komiteto leidimas.

Tyrimo rezultatų analizei ir gilesniam dalyvių pasakojimų supratimui remiuosi keliomis teorinėmis prieigomis. Musulmoniškasis feminizmas yra svarbi teorinė prieiga analizuojant lyčių dinamiką ir religinius principus musulmoniškose visuomenėse. Ši teorinė prieiga ne tik kvestionuoja patriarchalinius islamo tekstų aiškinimus, bet ir siekia suderinti religinį tikėjimą su feministiniais principais. Dvi reikšmingiausios mokslininkės, formavusios islamo feministinį diskursą, yra Amina Wadud ir Asma Barlas.

Amina Wadud, knygos *Qur'an and Woman* (1999) autorė, kritiškai vertina tradicinius Korano aiškinimus, kurie prisidėjo prie lyčių nelygybės įtvirtinimo. Ji pabrėžia, kad vyrų dominuojama islamo teologija ilgainiui įtvirtino patriarchalines lyties sampratas, ir siūlo požiūrį į šventąjį tekstą, grindžiamą lygybės ir teisingumo principais. Wadud siekia atkurti moterų vaidmenį interpretuojant šventus islamo raštus, teigdama, kad islamo etinės nuostatos remiasi užuojauta, pagarba ir lyčių lygybe. Ji taip pat kritikuoja poligamiją, teigdama, kad Korane reikalaujamas teisingumas tokiuose santykiuose praktikoje yra itin sunkiai pasiekiamas, o monogamija, jos požiūriu, labiau atitinka islamiškas vertybes.

Panašiai ir Asma Barlas, knygos *Believing Women in Islam* (2002) autorė, kritikuoja patriarchalinius Korano aiškinimus. Ji teigia, kad vyrų dominavimas nėra suderinamas su islamo etinėmis nuostatomis, o poligamijos leidimas buvo susijęs su konkrečiu istoriniu kontekstu – socialinio teisingumo ir našlių apsaugos siekiu, kurio pradinės prielaidos šiuolaikinėje visuomenėje yra pakitusios. Todėl, pasak Barlas, šiuolaikinė poligamijos praktika sunkiai suderinama su Korano siekiu užtikrinti teisingumą ir lygybę.

Abi autorės siūlo naują požiūrį į islamo tekstus, grindžiamą lyčių lygybės perspektyva, kartu išlaikant islamo religijos vertybinį pagrindą. Jų darbai ne tik kritikuoja patriarchalines normas, bet ir sudaro prielaidas moterų aktyvesniam dalyvavimui religiniame gyvenime.

Tolesnei tyrimo analizei pasitelkiami Judith Butler darbai, suteikiantys teorinių įžvalgų apie lyties konstravimą ir normatyvinių struktūrų veikimą. Butler, viena svarbiausių šiuolaikinės feministinės teorijos atstovių, knygoje *Gender Trouble* (1990) teigia, kad lytis nėra įgimta, bet formuojama per pasikartojančius, socialines normas atitinkančius veiksmus. Ši perspektyva leidžia kvestionuoti priespaudos struktūras ir suprasti, kaip jos palaikomos kasdienėse praktikose. Knygoje *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997) Butler nagrinėja, kaip galia tuo pačiu metu riboja ir suteikia subjektui tapatybę. Šios teorinės įžvalgos leidžia analizuoti, kaip moterys ribotuose socialiniuose ir religiniuose kontekstuose laviruoja tarp normų ir formuoja veikimo strategijas.

Saba Mahmood – feministinės teorijos ir antropologijos mokslininkė, nagrinėjanti įsigalinimo, etikos ir pamaldumo temas religiniuose bei kultūriniuose kontekstuose. Mahmood kritikuoja įsitikinimą, kad įsigalinimas visada turi reikšti pasipriešinimą priespaudai, ir teigia, jog moterys gali įsigalinti veikdamos egzistuojančių religinių ir kultūrinių normų rėmuose.

Šis požiūris ypač reikšmingas poligamijos analizei, nes leidžia moterų įsigalinimą vertinti jų pačių vertybių ir etinių nuostatų rėmuose. Pasak Mahmood, praktikos, kurios iš Vakarų perspektyvos dažnai suprantamos kaip paklusnumas, gali būti sąmoningos religingumo formos, o ne konformizmo išraiška.

Galiausiai, Margaret Archer refleksyvumo samprata leidžia analizuoti, kaip individai, veikdami struktūrinių, religinių ir socialinių normų rėmuose, svarsto savo padėtį, vertybes ir priima sprendimus kasdienėse situacijose. Archer pabrėžia, kad refleksyvumas nebūtinai reiškia siekį transformuoti egzistuojančias struktūras, bet gali pasireikšti kaip vidinis moralinis ir praktinis svarstymas, leidžiantis asmeniui orientuotis sudėtinguose socialiniuose kontekstuose. Ši prieiga padeda empiriškai nagrinėti, kaip moterys poligaminiuose santykiuose apmąsto savo pasirinkimus ir veikimo galimybes, net ir neperžengdamos nusistovėjusių normatyvinių rėmų.

Poligamija islamiškose visuomenėse yra sudėtingas ir daugiaplanis reiškinys, apimantis istorinius, teisinius, socialinius ir psichologinius aspektus. Šioje disertacijoje analizuojami tiek struktūriniai, tiek asmeniniai šio reiškinio aspektai, siekiant parodyti, kaip jie formuoja moterų veikimą ir patirtis. Toliau pateikiamos išvados, apibendrinančios pagrindines įžvalgas ir atsakančios į iškeltus tyrimo klausimus bei uždavinius.

Pirma, poligamija glaudžiai susijusi su moterų įsigalinimo ir veikimo galimybėmis, kurias formuoja istorinių, teisinių, socialinių ir psichologinių veiksnių sankirta.

Istoriškai poligamijos ištakos siejamos su socialinėmis aplinkybėmis, tokiomis kaip didelis vyrų mirtingumas karuose, našlystės paplitimas ir ekonominis nestabilumas. Nors ši praktika atliko svarbų socialinį vaidmenį, ji kartu įtvirtino moterų priklausomybę ir patriarchalines struktūras, ribojančias jų savarankiškumą ir sprendimų laisvę.

Teisiniu požiūriu tokie įstatymai kaip Jordanijos Asmeninio statuso įstatymas siekia reguliuoti poligamiją ir deklaruoja moterų apsaugą šeiminiuose santykiuose. Tačiau praktikoje dažnai trūksta veiksmingų kontrolės mechanizmų, pavyzdžiui, realios teismo priežiūros dėl vyro įsipareigojimų laikymosi. Dėl to moterys išlieka pažeidžiamos ir priklausomos nuo teismo sprendimų, o galimybes ieškoti teisinės pagalbos neretai riboja visuomenės spaudimas ir finansinių išteklių stoka.

Socialiniame kontekste, poligamijos praktiką stipriai veikia kultūriniai ir religiniai lūkesčiai, pagal kuriuos moterys laikomos šeimos ir moralinės pusiausvyros saugotojomis. Socialinė padėtis ir išsilavinimas daro įtaką moters galimybėms reikšti savo poziciją dėl santuokos sąlygų ar poligamijos priėmimo/atsisakymo klausimais. Išsilavinimas ir ekonominis savarankiškumas suteikia moterims daugiau galimybių reikšti savo nuomonę santuokoje, tuo tarpu tradicinėje aplinkoje gyvenančios moterys dažniau išlieka priklausomos nuo patriarchalinių normų, ribojančių jų sprendimų laisvę.

Psichologiniu aspektu, moterys poligaminėse santuokose neretai patiria nerimą, pavydą ir menkos savivertės jausmą. Šiuos emocinius sunkumus dar labiau sustiprina visuomenės spaudimas ir stigmatizacija – pavyzdžiui, tiek pirmos tiek antros-ketvirtos žmonos gali būti suvokiamos kaip „antraeilės". Ilgainiui tai silpnina jų emocinį atsparumą ir pasitikėjimą savimi. Vis dėlto dalis moterų siekia šiuos sunkumus įveikti pasitelkdamos įvairias socialines ir teisines priemones, tokias kaip šeimos ar bendruomenės palaikymas, religinės normos ir praktikos, o kai kuriais atvejais – ir teisiniai instrumentai, pavyzdžiui, specifinių santuokos sutarties sąlygų numatymas ar kreipimasis į šariato teismą. Tai rodo, kad net ir ribojančiose aplinkybėse moterys ieško būdų formuoti savo padėtį ir veikimo galimybes.

Antroji išvada rodo, kad islamo feminizmo, įsigalinimo ir refleksyvumo teorijų analizė leidžia suformuoti konceptualų pagrindą, kuriame moterų veikimas religiniuose ir kultūriniuose kontekstuose suprantamas ne vien kaip pasipriešinimas normoms, bet ir kaip prasmingas veikimas jų rėmuose.

Islamo feminizmas leidžia kritiškai peržiūrėti patriarchalinius religinių tekstų aiškinimus, remiantis Korane aptariamais teisingumo ir lygybės tarp lyčių principais. Ši prieiga parodo, kad poligamijos legitimizavimas negali būti atsietas nuo konkretaus istorinio ir socialinio konteksto, kuriame šios

nuostatos formavosi, ir sudaro pagrindą analizuoti moterų veikimą pačios islamo tradicijos vertybinių rėmų viduje.

Įsigalinimo teorijos papildo šią perspektyvą, leisdamos moterų veikimą analizuoti ne kaip pasyvų paklusnumą ar neišvengiamą pasipriešinimą normoms, bet kaip sąmoningą religinių normų praktikavimą, grindžiamą etine laikysena ir savidisciplina. Šioje perspektyvoje tokios praktikos kaip poligamijos priėmimas ar tradicinių religinių vaidmenų atlikimas gali būti suprantamos kaip prasmingos veikimo formos, susijusios su konkrečiomis socialinėmis ir gyvenimo aplinkybėmis.

Refleksyvumo samprata leidžia analizuoti, kaip individai, veikdami struktūrinių, religinių ir socialinių normų rėmuose, apmąsto savo padėtį ir priima sprendimus kasdienėse situacijose. Refleksyvumas šiuo požiūriu suprantamas ne kaip siekis transformuoti egzistuojančias struktūras, bet kaip vidinis moralinis ir praktinis svarstymas, padedantis orientuotis sudėtinguose socialiniuose kontekstuose.

Šių teorinių prieigų sintezė leidžia išvengti supaprastintų opozicijų tarp pasipriešinimo ir paklusnumo ir sudaro nuoseklų konceptualų pagrindą moterų įsigalinimo ir savarankiškumo analizei islamo visuomenėse.

Trečioji išvada rodo, kad moterų patirtys poligaminėse santuokose formuojasi per tarpusavyje susijusius emocinius, socialinius ir religinius lygmenis, kurie tampa pagrindiniais jų kasdienio veikimo ir įveikos kontekstais.

Facebook grupės tyrimas rodo, kad moterų patirtys poligaminėse santuokose reiškiasi per emocinius, socialinius ir religinius lygmenis, kuriuose jos ieško prasmės ir paramos. Emociniu požiūriu moterys atvirai dalijasi kylančiais išgyvenimais, dažnai juos interpretuodamos kaip dvasinius išbandymus. Tokia religinė perspektyva padeda joms suteikti prasmę patiriamiems sunkumams ir išlaikyti vidinį atsparumą.

Socialiniu požiūriu, Facebook grupė veikė kaip svarbus paramos tinklas, kuriame moterys dalijosi praktiniais patarimais, emociniu palaikymu ir padrąsinimu. Moterų siūlomos strategijos, skirtos vidinei ramybei išlaikyti, atskleidžia kolektyvinių įveikos praktikų formavimąsi bendruomenės viduje. Šios praktikos leidžia kalbėti apie emocinio įsigalinimo procesą, kai moterys, dalydamosi patirtimis ir įvardydamos savo emocijas, įgyja galimybę jas reflektuoti ir įtraukti į savo kasdienį veikimą.

Religiniu požiūriu grupės diskusijose matyti tradicinių mokymų ir feministinių interpretacijų dialogo elementai. Moterys dažnai kritiškai vertina selektyvų Korano eilučių taikymą, kuris palaiko vyrų interesus, ir diskusijose pasitelkia islamo feministinėms interpretacijoms artimas teisingumo, lygybės ir užuojautos idėjas. Vis dėlto šios refleksijos dažniausiai reiškiasi diskusijų ir

emocinio palaikymo lygmenyje, neperaugdamos į nuoseklų praktinį ar kolektyvinį veikimą.

Šiame religiniame kontekste įsigalinimas nereiškia atviros kovos ar siekio keisti islamišką sistemą, bet veikiau gebėjimą reflektuoti religinius mokymus ir rasti asmeninę prasmę net ir ribojančiose poligamijos struktūrose. Remiantis Mahmood etinės saviugdos samprata, tyrimas atskleidžia, kad religinių praktikų laikymasis nėra pasyvus paklusnumas, bet apgalvota, religine etika grindžiama įsigalinimo forma.

Antroji tyrimo dalis, paremta etnografiniu tyrimu Amane, Jordanijoje, rodo, kad moterų patirtys poligaminėse santuokose formuojasi kasdienėse religinių ir socialinių santykių praktikose.

Religiniu požiūriu islamo mokymai tampa svarbiu atskaitos tašku, per kurį moterys apmąsto savo padėtį ir moralines ribas. Daugelis moterų poligamiją pripažįsta kaip islamo leidžiamą praktiką, pabrėždamos Korane numatytas teisingumo ir lygybės sąlygas. Jų religinis įsigalinimas daugiausia pasireiškia refleksyviu religinių tekstų apmąstymu, kuris leidžia kvestionuoti paviršutinišką taisyklių taikymą ir kritikuoti patriarchalines interpretacijas, tačiau dažniausiai apsiriboja asmenine refleksija ir kasdieniu santykio su religija apmąstymu. Tokia refleksija padeda moterims palaikyti santykį su religija kaip prasminga etine sistema, bet nebūtinai virsta bandymu keisti egzistuojančias religines ar socialines struktūras.

Socialiniu požiūriu poligaminiai santykiai formuojasi veikiami šeimos, ekonominių ir visuomenės lūkesčių. Kai kurios moterys poligamiją priima siekdamos finansinio saugumo ar socialinio stabilumo, kitos ją vertina kaip priemonę užsitikrinti paramą sau ir savo vaikams. Daugeliu atvejų moterys prisitaiko prie tradicinių vaidmenų, tačiau juos praktiškai perorganizuoja kasdienėje buityje – pavyzdžiui, dalijasi vaikų priežiūra ar kitomis buities atsakomybėmis – taip išlaikydamos tam tikrą pusiausvyrą ir savarankiškumą šeimos viduje.

Emociniu požiūriu moterys poligaminėse santuokose dažnai mokosi prisitaikyti prie savo situacijos, siekdamos išlaikyti emocinį stabilumą ir savivertę nepriklausomai nuo vyro. Daugelis atsigręžia į asmeninį augimą, tikėjimą ir šeimos gerovę, taip reguliuodamos kasdienius emocinius išgyvenimus. Šis procesas gali būti suprantamas kaip įsigalinimo forma, leidžianti moterims išlaikyti vidinį stabilumą ir savarankiškumą net ir ribojančiose santykių struktūrose. Kai kurios moterys taip pat kuria tarpusavio paramos ryšius su kitomis žmonomis, paversdamos santykius, dažnai suvokiamus kaip konkurencinius, bendradarbiavimo praktikomis.

Empiriniai duomenys rodo, kad skirtingų kartų moterys poligamijos reiškinį suvokia ir išgyvena nevienodai, o jų patirtys ir veikimo formos kinta

priklausomai nuo socialinės aplinkos, vertybinių ir gyvenimo patirties. Vyresnės moterys dažniau linkusios priimti poligamiją kaip nusistovėjusios socialinės ir religinės santvarkos dalį, kurioje siekiama darnos, stabilumo ir orumo. Jų įsigalinimas dažniausiai pasireiškia gebėjimu rasti prasmę ir dvasinę ramybę poligaminėje santuokoje, išlaikant šeimos vientisumą ir religinį nuoseklumą.

Jaunesnės moterys linkusios kritiškiau vertinti tradicinius vaidmenis ir siekti didesnio savarankiškumo – tiek per išsilavinimą, tiek per dalyvavimą diskusijose apie lygybę ir teisingumą. Tačiau abi kartos savo įsigalinimą grindžia refleksija ir gebėjimu prisitaikyti prie aplinkybių, išlaikant asmeninį orumą ir vidinį stabilumą.

Vis dėlto, nors pastebimos tam tikros kartų skirtumų tendencijos, moterų patirtys poligamijos kontekste išlieka įvairios. Kai kurios vyresnės moterys, patyrusios neigiamų poligamijos praktikos aspektų, vėliau ima ją vertinti kritiškiau ir siekia įspėti ar apsaugoti kitas moteris nuo panašių iššūkių. Šie niuansai atskleidžia, kad įsigalinimas poligamijos kontekste nėra pastovus ar vienareikšmis reiškinys, bet procesas, kuriame moterys nuolat permąsto savo pasirinkimus, vertybes ir santykį su tradicinėmis normomis.

Apibendrinant virtualios etnografijos ir etnografinio tyrimo Amane rezultatus, matyti, kad moterų veikimas dažniausiai reiškiasi ne kaip opozicija egzistuojančioms normoms, bet kaip jų apmąstymas, interpretavimas ir praktinis pritaikymas kasdienėse situacijose. Poligamijos kontekste moterų veikimo galimybės atsiskleidžia per etinius svarstymus, socialinius ryšius ir asmeniškai prasmingus religinius orientyrus, leidžiančius išlaikyti orumą ir vidinį stabilumą net sudėtingose bei ribojančiose aplinkybėse. Ši perspektyva pabrėžia, kad moterų įsigalinimas poligaminėse santuokose turi būti suprantamas jų pačių vertybinių nuostatų ir etinių įsipareigojimų kontekste.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gintarė Sereikaitė-Motiejūnė graduated from Vilnius University Asian Studies (Arabistics) program in 2017. She obtained her MA diploma in Modern Asian Studies from Vilnius University, Institute of Asian and Transcultural Studies in 2019. In 2019 – 2026 the author was a doctoral student at the joint doctoral program in the field of Ethnology of Vilnius University, Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore and Lithuanian Academy of Theater and Music.

Dissertation topic: "Navigating Agency in Polygamous Marriages: An Ethnographic Study of Muslim Women's Experiences within Islamic and Societal Contexts"

During the doctoral studies, the author completed a fieldwork trip to Jordan in 2024. Since 2019 the author teaches at Vilnius University Institute of Asian and Transcultural Studies and is the active member of the Arab Culture Forum, a public organization dedicated to promoting awareness of Middle Eastern culture in Lithuania.

Academic interests: gender relations in the Middle East, polygamous relationships in Islam, radical Islamist movements in the Middle East.

## APIE AUTORĘ

Gintarė Sereikaitė-Motiejūnė 2017 m. baigė Vilniaus universiteto Azijos studijų (arabistikos) bakalauro programą. 2019 m. įgijo Azijos studijų magistro laipsnį Vilniaus universiteto Azijos ir transkultūrinių studijų institute. 2019–2026 m. buvo Vilniaus universiteto, Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos instituto bei Lietuvos muzikos ir teatro akademijos jungtinės doktorantūros etnologijos krypties doktorantė.

Disertacijos tema: *Įsigalinimo* raiška poligaminėse santuokose: etnografinis musulmonių moterų patirčių tyrimas religiniame ir socialiniame kontekstuose.

Doktorantūros metu autorė 2024 m. birželį atliko lauko tyrimą Amane, Jordanijoje. Nuo 2019 m. doktorantė dėsto Vilniaus universiteto Azijos ir transkultūrinių studijų institute. Ji taip pat yra aktyvi Arabų kultūros forumo, siekiančios skatinti Artimųjų Rytų kultūros pažinimą Lietuvoje, narė.

Moksliniai interesai: lyčių santykiai Artimuosiuose Rytuose, poligaminiai santykiai islame, radikalūs islamistiniai judėjimai Artimuosiuose Rytuose.

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