

# The perils of polygamy; Sex and inequality

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## FULL TEXT

How plural marriage begets violence

IT IS a truth universally acknowledged, or at least widely accepted in South Sudan, that a man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of many wives. Paul Malong, South Sudan's former army chief of staff, has more than 100—no one knows the exact number. A news website put it at 112 in February, after one of the youngest of them ran off to marry a teacher. The couple were said to be in hiding. To adapt Jane Austen again, we are all fools in love, but especially so if we cuckold a warlord in one of the world's most violent countries.

Men in South Sudan typically marry as often as their wealth—often measured in cattle—will allow. Perhaps 40% of marriages are polygamous. "In [our] culture, the more family you have, the more people respect you," says William, a young IT specialist in search of his second wife (his name, like some others in this article, has been changed). Having studied in America and come back to his home village, he finds that he is wealthy by local standards. So why be content with just one bride?

Few South Sudanese see the connection between these matrimonial customs and the country's horrific civil war. If you ask them the reason for the violence, locals will blame tribalism, greedy politicians, weak institutions and perhaps the oil wealth which gives warlords something to fight over. All true, but not the whole story.

Wherever it is widely practised, polygamy (specifically polygyny, the taking of multiple wives) destabilises society, largely because it is a form of inequality which creates an urgent distress in the hearts, and loins, of young men. If a rich man has a Lamborghini, that does not mean that a poor man has to walk, for the supply of cars is not fixed. By contrast, every time a rich man takes an extra wife, another poor man must remain single. If the richest and most powerful 10% of men have, say, four wives each, the bottom 30% of men cannot marry. Young men will take desperate measures to avoid this state.

This is one of the reasons why the Arab Spring erupted, why the jihadists of Boko Haram and Islamic State were able to conquer swathes of Nigeria, Iraq and Syria, and why the polygamous parts of Indonesia and Haiti are so turbulent. Polygamous societies are bloodier, more likely to invade their neighbours and more prone to collapse than others are. The taking of multiple wives is a feature of life in all of the 20 most unstable countries on the Fragile States Index compiled by the Fund for Peace, an NGO (see chart on next page).

Because polygamy is illegal in most rich countries, many Westerners underestimate how common it is. More than a third of women in West Africa are married to a man who has more than one wife. Plural marriages are plentiful in the Arab world, and fairly common in South-East Asia and a few parts of the Caribbean. The cultures involved are usually patrilineal: ie, the family is defined by the male bloodline. And they are patrilocal: wives join the husband's family and leave their own behind. Marriages are often sealed by the payment of a brideprice from the groom's family to the bride's. This is supposed to compensate the bride's family for the cost of raising her.

A few men attract multiple wives by being exceptionally charismatic, or by persuading others that they are holy. "There may be examples of [male] cult leaders who did not make use of their position to further their personal polygyny, but I cannot think of any," notes David Barash of the University of Washington in "Out of Eden: The Surprising Consequences of Polygamy". However, the most important enabler of the practice is not the unequal distribution of charm but the unequal distribution of wealth. Brideprice societies where wealth is unevenly distributed lend themselves to polygamy—which in turn inflates the price of brides, often to ruinous heights. In

wretchedly poor Afghanistan, the cost of a wedding for a young man averages \$12,000-\$20,000.

By increasing the bride price, polygamy tends to raise the age at which young men get married; it takes a long time to save enough money. At the same time, it lowers the age at which women get married. All but the wealthiest families need to "sell" their daughters before they can afford to "buy" wives for their sons; they also want the wives they shell out for to be young and fertile. In South Sudan "a girl is called an old lady at age 20 because she cannot bear many children after that," a local man told Marc Sommers of Boston University and Stephanie Schwartz of Columbia University. A tribal elder spelled out the maths of the situation. "When you have 10 daughters, each one will give you 30 cows, and they are all for [the father]. So then you have 300 cows." If a patriarch sells his daughters at 15 and does not let his sons marry until they are 30, he has 15 years to enjoy the returns on the assets he gained from brideprice. That's a lot of milk.

Valerie Hudson of Texas A&M University and Hilary Matfess of Yale have found that an inflated brideprice is a "critical" factor "predisposing young men to become involved in organised group violence for political purposes". Terrorist groups know this, too. Muhammad Kasab, a Pakistani terrorist hanged for his role in the Mumbai attacks of 2008, said he joined Lashkar-e-Taiba, the jihadist aggressor, because it promised to pay for his siblings to get married. In Nigeria, Boko Haram arranges marriages for its recruits. The so-called Islamic State used to offer foreign recruits \$1,500 towards a starter home and a free honeymoon in Raqqa. Radical Islamist groups in Egypt have also organised cheap marriages for members. It is not just in the next life that jihadists are promised virgins. The deepest deprivation

In South Sudan, brideprices may be anything from 30 to 300 cows. "For young men, the acquisition of so many cattle through legitimate means is nearly impossible," write Ms Hudson and Ms Matfess. The alternative is to steal a herd from the tribe next door. In a country awash with arms, such cattle raids are as bloody as they are frequent. "7 killed, 10 others wounded in cattle raid in Eastern Lakes," reads a typical headline in *This Day*, a South Sudanese paper. The article describes how "armed youths from neighbouring communities" stole 58 cows, leaving seven people—and 38 cows—shot dead "in tragic crossfire".

Thousands of South Sudanese are killed in cattle raids every year. "When you have cows, the first thing you must do is get a gun. If you don't have a gun, people will take your cows," says Jok, a 30-year-old cattle herder in Wau, a South Sudanese city. He is only carrying a machete, but he says his brothers have guns.

Jok loves cows. "They give you milk, and you can marry with them," he smiles. He says he will get married this year, though he does not yet have enough cows and, judging by his ragged clothes, he does not have the money to buy them, either. He is vague as to how he will acquire the necessary ruminants. But one can't help noticing that he is grazing his herd on land that has recently been ethnically cleansed. Dinkas like Jok walk around freely in Wau. Members of other tribes who used to live in the area huddle in camps for displaced people, guarded by UN peacekeepers.

The people in the camps all tell similar stories. The Dinkas came, dressed in blue, and attacked their homes, killing the men and stealing whatever they could carry away, including livestock and young women. "Many of my family were killed or raped," says Saida, a village trader. "The attackers cut people's heads off. All the young men have gone from our village now. Some have joined the rebels. Some fled to Sudan." Saida's husband escaped and is now with his other wife in Khartoum, the Sudanese capital. Saida is left tending five children. Asked why all this is happening, she bursts into tears.

"If you have a gun, you can get anything you want," says Abdullah, a farmer who was driven off his land so that Dinka marauders could graze their cattle on it. "If a man with a gun says 'I want to marry you', you can't say no," says Akech, an aid worker. This is why adolescent boys hover on the edge of battles in South Sudan. When a fighter is killed, they rush over and steal his weapon so that they can become fighters, too.

Overall, polygamy is in retreat. However, its supporters are fighting to preserve or even extend it. Two-fifths of Kazakhstanis want to re-legalise the practice (it was banned by the Bolsheviks). In 2008 they were thwarted, at least temporarily, when a female MP amended a pro-polygamy bill to say that polyandry—the taking of multiple husbands—would be allowed as well; Muslim greybeards balked at that.

In the West polygamy is too rare to be socially destabilising. To some extent this is because it is serialised. Rich and powerful men regularly swap older wives for younger ones, thus monopolising the prime reproductive years of several women. But that allows a few wives, not a few dozen. The polygamous enclaves in America run by breakaway Mormon sects are highly unstable—the old men in charge expel large numbers of young men for trivial offences so they can marry lots of young women themselves. Nevertheless, some American campaigners argue that parallelised polygamy should be made legal. If the constitution demands that gay marriage be allowed (as the Supreme Court ruled in 2015), then surely it is unconstitutional to disallow plural marriage, they argue. "Group marriage is the next horizon of social liberalism," writes Fredrik deBoer, an academic, in *Politico*, on the basis that long-term polyamorous relationships deserve as much legal protection as any others freely entered into.

Proponents of polygamy offer two main arguments beyond personal preference. One is that it is blessed in the Koran, which is true. The other is that it gives women a better chance of avoiding spinsterhood. Rania Hashem, a pro-polygamy campaigner in Egypt, claims that there is a shortage of men in her country. (There is not, but this is a common misconception among polygamists.) If more rich, educated Egyptian men take multiple wives, she says, this will make it easier for women to exercise their "right to have a husband". Mona Abu Shanab, another Egyptian polygamy advocate, argues that polygamy is a sensible way to assuage male sexual frustration, a common cause of divorce. "Women after marriage just disregard their men [and] focus on their kids. They...always have an excuse for not engaging in intimate relations; they are always 'tired' or 'sick'. This makes the men uncomfortable and drives them to...have a girlfriend."

Some men see polygamy as a pragmatic response to female infertility. "My first wife was issueless," says Gurmeet, a 65-year-old landlord in Lahore, Pakistan. At one point "she said our inability to have a child was because of my medical condition, not hers. I was enraged. I turned to religion and was guided [by God] to take a second wife." He had been planning to try in-vitro fertilisation but God's advice looked like a sounder investment. Initially, his first wife was "unwilling to share my affections with another woman". But as time passed, she accepted the situation, says Gurmeet. He divided the house into two parts, so his wives could live separately. He divided his time equally between them. "It worked," he says. The second wife had six children. But Gurmeet grumbles that she dressed less elegantly than his childless wife and did not keep her rooms as tidy.

Polygyny is hard work for men but good for women, says Gurmeet, because it is "undesirable" for a woman to be unmarried. Asked about polyandry, Gurmeet says, "I strongly disapprove. It is against nature for a woman to have multiple partners." He elaborates: "As a young man I kept chickens. The cock has many hens, but he does not allow the females to mate with more than one partner. So it's against natural law."

#### Bad for brides

Polygamy "can work fine, provided you do justice to [all wives] equally," says Amar, a Pakistani judge with two wives. "If you do not prefer any one over the others, no problem arises." He admits that if two wives live together in the same home, "a natural rivalry" arises. Dividing property can also be complicated and leads to a lot of litigation. But Amar thinks he gets it right. "My routine is: I spend one night with one wife and one night with the other. That way, nobody feels treated badly. And I give them exactly the same amount of money to spend: they get one credit card each. As a judge, it is [my] foremost duty to deliver justice." One of his wives enters the room and offers to give her side of the story. Her husband banishes her, with visible irritation, before your correspondent can ask her anything.

Although women in a polygamous society find it relatively easy to get married, the quality of their marriages may not be high. Because such brides are often much younger, not to mention ill-educated, they find it hard to stand up to their husbands. And brideprice is not conducive to a relationship of equals.

In South Sudan, nearly 80% of people think it acceptable for a husband to beat his wife for such things as refusing sex, burning the dinner and so on. Divorce requires that the bride's family repay the brideprice; they may thus insist that the abused woman stays with her husband no matter how badly he treats her.

Polygamy is also bad for children. A study of 240,000 children in 29 African countries found that, after controlling for other factors, those in polygamous families were more likely to die young. A study among the Dogon of Mali

found that a child in a polygynous family was seven to 11 times more likely to die early than a child in a monogamous one. The father spends his time siring more children rather than looking after the ones he already has, Mr Barash explains. Also, according to the Dogon themselves, jealous co-wives sometimes poison each other's offspring so that their own will inherit more.

For Akech, the South Sudanese aid worker, growing up in a polygamous family "wasn't easy". Her father, a former rebel commander, had eight wives and numerous concubines. She has 41 siblings that she knows of. When she was six, she used to fetch 20 litres of water each day for her mother to use to make siko, a form of moonshine. Sometimes her father would come round drunk, bang on the door and take her mother's money to spend on another woman. Akech remembers her parents quarrelling a lot. That said, the extended family could pull together in an emergency. When her father was shot in the leg, his wives teamed up to bathe him, get him to hospital and pay his medical bills.

One day, when Akech was at university, her father asked her to come and see him. "We had never had a father-daughter bond, so I was excited," she remembers. When she arrived, he introduced her to a fellow officer and ordered her to marry him. She was horrified. Her father's friend was 65. Akech was 19.

She pretended to accept the proposal and said she just wanted to pop back to her college, which was in a neighbouring country, to collect her things. Her father agreed. She went back to college and stayed there.

That was more than a decade ago. Akech went on to complete university and find a good job. She recently bought her now-elderly father a house, partly to show him the value of her education, but also out of a residual sense of guilt at having once defied him. "In my culture, your parents are your earthly gods. I tried not to disappoint him," she says. He has never said sorry for attempting to sell her.

## DETAILS

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