

Report on Polygamy
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A. Introduction

a. Definitions and assumptions. Polygamy consists of either polygyny (many wives) or polyandry (many husbands). In this report we interpret ‘polygamy’ as equivalent to polygyny.

b. In the following economic analysis it is assumed that marriage organizes household production involving the work of wives or husbands, or both. Work in household production includes giving birth, raising children, and taking care of homes (This is not a comprehensive list).

c. At the core of the economic analysis presented in this report is a demand and supply analysis of marriage. Markets originate because brides and grooms can potentially substitute for each other. Markets for marriage are a universal feature.

d. The results of a marriage market analysis depend strongly on whether all participants in marriage markets are free to maximize their own wellbeing. In most societies, marriage markets are heavily regulated and not ‘free’ markets.

e. The following analysis is in the spirit of ‘political economy’, in the sense that political institutions affect the functioning of markets. In particular, women’s wellbeing will vary as a function of marriage market conditions as well as the ways that men influence marital institutions—such as laws regarding polygamy—as response to market conditions.

B. Economic analysis

- a. *Polygamy causes increased male competition over women.* The economics of marriage was pioneered by University of Chicago economist Gary Becker. When awarding him the Nobel prize, the Swedish academy mentioned Becker’s contributions to the economics of the family. It follows from Becker’s (1973) demand and supply analysis of marriage markets that when polygamy is permitted, there will be a larger demand for wives. Polygamy does not change the number of women, but allows men to enter the market multiple times, just adding to the demand. As a result, if markets for wives are competitive and allowed to clear at the intersection of demand and supply, the market value of women will rise if polygamy is permitted.
- b. *Women don’t necessarily capture their increased market value in polygamous societies.* Men have more of an incentive to create institutions that lower women’s bargaining power in marriage when women’s market value is higher and bargaining

may tilt in favor of women. As pointed out in Guttentag and Secord (1983) and Grossbard-Shechtman (1993), the high value of women in marriage markets in polygamous societies is expected to increase men's incentives to control women by way of political and religious institutions, such as arranged marriages and marriages of minors.

- c. ***The more time-intensive household production, the more polygamy is likely to be observed.*** Marriage markets are to a large degree markets for women's work in household production. If few commercial goods and services are available for purchase, more of the production burden falls on households. In most societies for which we have data for, women are more likely to perform household production tasks, especially the tasks that most people like to avoid when their income increases (such as cleaning and food preparation; see Grossbard, Gimenez and Molina 2009). Such tasks have been called 'female tasks' in the sociological literature (see Phillip Cohen 2004). In economies with a relatively undeveloped commercial sector, men have a larger demand for female tasks and this may translate in the creation of polygamous households involving more than one wife engaging in the work of household production. From this perspective, there is no rationale to legalize polygamy in modern industrialized economies.

C. Evidence on Institutions associated with polygamy that reduce women's wellbeing

Please note an important caveat regarding all the points in this section. We do not know whether the existence of polygamy caused these institutions, or if causality runs the other way. Furthermore, the association between polygamy and these other institutions could be spurious in the sense that both institutions could be caused by other factors. Nevertheless, it is very revealing that cross-culturally polygamy is associated with a large number of features that seem undesirable either from a strictly female perspective or from the perspective of society's best interest.

- a. ***Early marriage.*** As documented in Grossbard (1978) women in polygamous societies are more likely to marry young. This is not necessarily the case with men, so polygamous societies are characterized by large age differences between husbands and wives. There is also evidence that women in polygamous households in North America marry at particularly young ages and are substantially younger than their husbands. In turn, early marriage increases the likelihood of early widowhood and financial hardship for women.
- b. ***Arranged marriage.*** If we compare monogamous countries with countries where polygamy is legal we observe a much higher frequency of arranged marriage in polygamous societies. In particular, large proportions of young couples in Africa and the Indian subcontinent have arranged marriages, and most of the countries in which they live have legalized polygamy. Arranged marriages are undesirable from young adults' point of view in the sense that they interfere with their autonomy in a very important matter. Furthermore, many societies who impose arranged marriages on their children also use violence and the threat of violence to enforce the families' best interest. For example, in Israel all citizens are exposed to modern ideas about love and

marriage. Muslims and Druzes have more arranged marriages than Christians and Jews. Most instances of young women found killed by relatives are found in the Muslim and Druze sector, and typically in the context of women refusing to go along with their family's choice of mate.

- c. ***Brideprice is often paid*** in polygamous societies. This is payment by the groom for the costs of obtaining a bride. Sometimes it is also called 'bridewealth'. This means that grooms pay part of the expected value of a woman's work in household production upfront to the woman's relatives instead of women experiencing the benefit of their high value after marriage (see Becker 1981, Grossbard-Shechtman 1978, 1993). Such redistribution of surplus value hurts women and benefits men of an older generation. If more of the rewards for women's work consists of a monetary transfer to the women's guardian there may also be less of need for men to provide emotional rewards in marriage. Furthermore, women may also suffer the consequences of the institution of a refundable brideprice, as is the case in Uganda. It has been found that when brideprice is refundable there are stricter standards of fidelity for women imposed on women than on men (see Bishai and Grossbard, forthcoming). This creates a sense of unfairness in marriage.
- d. ***Divorce***. One observes an association between easy divorce and polygamy (Grossbard-Shechtman 1993). For example, the Kanuris of Nigeria have very easy divorce and high rates of polygamy. Divorce tends to be relatively easy to perform in Muslim societies, and these societies are also typically accepting polygamy. In the case of Judaism, when rabbis outlawed polygamy in the 11th century, they also gave more protection to women at divorce (Grossbard 1986). One possible reason why the two institutions tend to go hand in hand is that society is less concerned about the repercussions of divorce to women in terms of single status and poverty when polygamy is legal and remarriage is easier for women. Whereas easier remarriage is an advantage for women, easier divorce tends to be disadvantageous to women. In a recent context, it was observed that women's property settlements went down after the introduction of no-fault divorce in California (Becker 1981). No-fault divorce made divorce easier.
- e. ***Female circumcision***. Many of the same societies that have polygamy also have female circumcision (also called female genital mutilation), an institution that reduces women's potential for a happy married life (Han 2002). In communities where polygamy is prominent, female circumcision is partially intended as a tool to curb women's sex drive, thus easing the pressure on the husband to satisfy all of his wives sexually.(see Rahman & Toubia 2000). In polygamous societies women have been found to justify the custom of female circumcision based on the belief that circumcision increases the sexual pleasure of men and therefore reduces the chance of their husband taking another wife (Gruenbaum. 2001).
- f. ***Purdah, the seclusion of women***. Many Muslim societies, including Saudi Arabia and the Kanuris of Nigeria, practice both purdah and polygamy (more on the practice among the Kanuris is found in Ronald Cohen 1971). The institution of purdah limits women's freedom of movement and typically means that women don't participate in

the labor force. This makes them more dependent on their husbands financially. The Canadian polygamous society of Bountiful does not have ‘purdah’ but it remains distanced from the rest of Canadian society (Campbell 2005).

- g. ***Low emphasis on the emotional side of marriage.*** Many polygynous societies discourage romantic love. For example, this is the case among the Kanuris (Ronald Cohen 1971). This de-emphasis of romantic love is likely to hurt women more than men, as women typically place more emphasis on romantic love in their revealed consumption preferences in democratic societies offering a variety of books and movies. For example, most readers of Harlequin romantic novels are women.
- h. ***Jealousy.*** Within polygamous societies it has been observed that polygamy is associated with high levels of jealousy among co-wives (Al-Krenawi et al. 1997, 2001). This makes sense to the extent that men in polygamous households divide their attention among more than one wife.
- i. ***Surveys.*** When interviewed, very few women in both Mali and South Africa—countries where polygamy is prevalent—said they look favorably upon polygamy (Dangor 2001, Madhavan 2002).
- j. ***Psychological health problems.*** Polygamy has been associated with psychological distress. Al-Krenawi et al (2001) report that senior wives expressed great distress when their husbands took another wife.

D. Institutions found in polygamous societies aimed at alleviating the problems caused by polygamy: indirect recognition that there are such problems.

- a. ***Prohibition on number of wives.*** Most societies allowing polygamy limit the number of wives that are allowed per husband. Many of them follow the Islam’s rule limiting the number of wives to four. Implicitly, this recognizes that polygamy can be detrimental and needs to be restricted. The harm caused by polygamy does not necessarily fall on women. It could also fall on men who may find it difficult to secure a wife when they have to compete with potential polygamists.
- b. ***Rotation.*** It is the custom among the Kanuris of Nigeria that a husband rotates among his wives: he takes turns sleeping in each wife’s home following a fixed schedule that allocates equal time to each wife. Such regulation appears to be the result of the wives’ suffering from their husband’s attention being divided among multiple wives.
- c. ***Encouragement of cooperation*** in household production among the various wives in an African society that I studied, the Kanuris of Nigeria. This is an implicit recognition that there is a tendency for co-wives to fight with each other. Giving supervisory authority to the senior wife is one way conflicts among co-wives are reduced (see Gage-Brandon 1992).

- d. ***Separate dwellings*** for each wife, possibly meaning that one wife is in the country and one in the city (Clignet and Sween 1974).
- e. ***Sororal polygyny***. Sisters may be less likely to fight with each other than unrelated co-wives. Murdock (1949) found that 70 of the 193 polygynous societies he surveyed had sororal polygyny.

E. Other undesirable consequence of polygamy and undesirable results for children

- a. ***Widowhood***. Wives of polygamists are more likely to be widowed young, as polygamists are often considerably older than they are.
- b. ***Children's human capital***. Polygamist men tend to spend their money on having more children and investing little in their education, as opposed to having fewer children with higher levels of human capital (Gould et al xx).
- c. ***More health problems in children***. A cross-sectional association between polygyny and child mortality has been documented by Amey (2002) and Gyimah (2009).

F. Potential Unintended consequence for Canada

Were Canada to legalize polygamy, one expects

- a. Canadian women willing to live in polygamous households are likely to have low education, men are likely to have higher than average income so they can afford multiple wives (Wives of polygamists tend to be less educated than monogamous wives according to Grossbard-Shechtman 1993). The disparity between husbands and wives is likely to be associated with more male control over women's lives.
- b. Women may live with the constant threat of being reduced to the second wife position (see M'Salha 2001).
- c. More competition for scarce women on the part of men, leaving many men unmarried. It is the possible discontent of poor men that may have contributed to the demise of polygamy in the West (see Grossbard-Shechtman 1980).

G. Concluding assessment

a. In the cultures and societies worldwide that have embraced it, polygamy is associated with undesirable economic, societal, physical, and emotional factors related to women's wellbeing. The natural economic consequence of polygamy is increased market value for women, though the women themselves do not realize the economic benefit of their greater value. Rather, women tend to be treated more like commodities in polygamous societies, and their freedom to manage their own economic circumstance and destiny is reduced. This loss of control by women in polygamous civilizations is seen in the early and arranged marriages, which are so prevalent, along with the practice of paying a brideprice. Easy exits from marriage by the way of simple divorce proceedings add to women's undesirable

circumstances observed in polygamous societies. The physical and emotional distress associated with the polygamy way of life is no less devastating. The practice of female circumcision amongst polygamous peoples is self-evident in terms of its inflicted pain, as is the emotional detachment, jealousy, and absence of genuine emotional love associated with the practice.

b. It is common within polygamous communities that wives are widowed young because of age disparities between wives and their husbands. Polygamous households also demonstrate lower overall levels of education and greater proportional amounts of health problems.

c. Many of the societies that have tolerated the practice of polygamy simultaneously recognize its harm. For example, some polygamous cultures limit the number of wives that a man may take. Also, traditions like regular rotations by the husband through and amongst multiple wives as well as separate residences demonstrate an acknowledgment of the harm being inflicted upon the women.

d. It has not been proven scientifically that the association observed between polygamy and any of the undesirable individual social features mentioned above is caused by the institution of polygamy. Nevertheless, the list of undesirable social features is so long that it is hard to escape the conclusion that some of these results are caused by the institution of polygamy. If only part of the undesirable results mentioned above will follow from the legalization of polygamy in Canada, it is sufficient reason to strongly oppose a legalized polygamy that may cause significant harm to women, children, and the men who love them. Furthermore, men may suffer undesirable consequences as increased competition for women may increase the number of involuntarily unmarried men.

e. Based on my experience, research and writing regarding the practice of polygamy around the world, my opinion is that Canada has a significant interest in prohibiting the practice of polygamy.

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