Polygamy: Discourse and Practice in Palestinian Society in Israel

(Summary)

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Introduction

Polygamy is one of the most contentious issues bearing on women and women's rights. The phenomenon declined globally at the beginning of the 20th century only to make a comeback in the early 1970s, and has today returned to the forefront of pressing concerns in the struggle for women's rights. Statistics indicate that there has been a marked revival of the practice in recent years in both the Middle East specifically and in Muslim societies in general— as well as in a number other regions of the world (Yamani, 2008).

This study investigates the origins of polygamy in Palestinian society in Israel, the factors that have served to generate and consolidate it, and the surrounding context that either fosters its growth or hampers its spread. The majority of studies that have been carried out on the phenomenon of polygamy among Palestinians in Israel have addressed the Arab Bedouin in the Naqab (Negev) region, where the phenomenon is particularly widespread, accounting for between 20%-36%[1] of all marriages. These studies have dealt with the Arab Bedouin as a group separate from the wider Palestinian minority in Israel, and most have tackled the question of polygamy from an Orientalist perspective. They have consequently attributed its causes to Bedouin culture and customs, without delving into the political, economic and social reality underlying its prevalence. Such studies have also failed to deal with the systematic racist policies or institutional repression in place in Israel, and their impact on the situation of Palestinian women, be they Bedouin, rural or urban. The research in the bulk of these studies has been confined to a comparison between the psychological state of the first and second wives (Al-Krenawi, 1999; Al-Krenawi & Lightman 2000; Al-Krenawi 2001). As a result, their findings are incomplete and non-comprehensive.

Due to the lack of accurate statistics on polygamy rates within the Arab community in Israel, percentages for the Naqab and other areas in all probability do not reflect the actual situation.[2] The lack of hard data arises from the fact that the practice of polygamy is illegal under Article 176 of the Israeli Penal Code, and carries a maximum sentence of five years' imprisonment. Most polygamous marriages therefore take place outside the law and are not registered with the Population Registry. The marriage takes place in the presence of witnesses and in many cases is validated in the *Shari'a* courts (Abu Rabia, 2008).[3] Such a

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[1] Report by Orly Loutan from the Knesset Research and Information Center, presented to the Committee on the Status of Women in 2006.

[2] According to a Knesset report provided to the Committee for the Advancement of the Status of Women, official statistics indicate that a small number of polygamous marriages take place each year. In 2005, for example, twenty-four polygamous marriages were registered, eighteen of which took place in Israel and six abroad.

[3] In the 55th volume of *Adalah's Newsletter*, published in 2008, Abu Rabia draws a comparison between *Shari'a* courts in the country and the *Shari'a* court in the city of Beer Sheva (which is responsible for the majority of the Bedouin population of the Naqab) in the years 2000 to 2004, finding that while the *Shari'a* courts in the various regions of the country granted only a small percentage of marriage permits for polygamous marriages, the percentage of these permits

contract is regarded as a legitimate marriage contract under Islamic *Shari'a* law, whereas under Israeli law it is classed as "cohabitation by an unmarried couple."[4] Penalties are virtually never enforced, primarily due to a loophole in the law, which refrains from imposing any penalty as long as the marriage is not officially registered. However, the most decisive factor in the state's handling of polygamy and its failure to enforce the law is the fact that state institutions regard polygamy as a practice associated with a distinct "culture", in which there is no need for intervention. The state therefore turns a blind eye to such violations in the name of "cultural sensitivity" (a rare display, given state policies regarding home demolitions, land confiscations and other abusive practices against Palestinian citizens of Israel). Hence the importance of studying the phenomenon of polygamy in Palestinian society in the context of the State of Israel, taking into account the multiple levels of oppression practiced against Palestinian women: firstly, oppression at the hands of the state and its systematic, discriminatory policies against the Palestinian minority, and secondly, the patriarchal oppression that is practiced against them by their community.

Research premises

The present research is based primarily on a qualitative research methodology. It employs in-depth interviews with women and men living under polygamous marriage arrangements, in order to gain an understanding of the dynamics involved in this mode of family life, and to study and analyze it from the perspective of the individuals within it. It also allows the women and men who participated in the study to present their own viewpoints, attitudes and ways of coping with it – in their own language, as they express it – rather than deliberating the phenomenon from afar. At a second level, the study works to survey societal attitudes and interpretations of the phenomenon of polygamy, by examining discussions held in a number of focus groups comprising people from various segments of society.

The present research gives center stage to women living in polygamous marriage arrangements: wives whose husbands have married another woman, as well as "second wives" who have married an already-married man. This approach flies in the face of the *status quo*, where Palestinian women have been routinely "silenced" in a male-oriented society in which male voices always dominate. Among others, it works to create a space for "second" wives, as individuals and as a group with their own perceptions, reasons, positions and understandings of the arrangement. The study thus positions women at the heart of the research, as subjects who express themselves and do not merely serve as objects under study. It is therefore a study that is not *about* women but one conducted *with* women — one that makes room for the diverse lifestyles that have come to light both through the in-depth interviews and the focus groups. It emphasizes

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granted by the Beer Sheva *Shari'a* court was 66%. Thus polygamous marriage permits were granted in the majority of cases before the Beer Sheva *Shari'a* court.
[4] A type of common-law arrangement where the state recognizes that a couple is "known in public."

diversity, understanding of the human experience and the uniqueness of women and of men, while avoiding treating women as "jewels" and steering clear of stereotyped gender patterns and roles.

To the extent that the study exposes the various practices and processes inherent in polygamous unions and their unique nature, it also seeks to provide a structural outline of women's lives by attempting to break these stereotypes. It does not, however, ignore the prevailing cultural discourse and associated popular perceptions of the roles of men and women, marriage and polygamy. As Webb (2002: 20) argues, it is futile simply to deny or disregard the reality of such perceptions, because to refuse to engage with them is to overlook or discount the power of dominant cultural values. As has been demonstrated in other societies, to oppose these values is generally more difficult than to accommodate them. It should be noted that the use of in-depth interview and focus groups does not imply that the study is comprehensive or representative of all cases of polygamy, or of all society's attitudes towards it. Rather, it should be seen as a contribution to exploring the issue of polygamy from a perspective that differs from the prevailing view, and which seeks to bridge the existing knowledge gap.

Research methodology

The present study employs a qualitative research methodology. In its first phase, in-depth interviews were conducted among twelve women currently ensconced in polygamous arrangements, eight of whom are wives whose husbands went on to marry another woman, and four of whom became betrothed to an already-married man. Interviews were also held with seven men involved in polygamous marriage arrangements. Interviews were carried out in a variety of different geographical areas of the country. The interviews with the women were distributed as follows: four interviews with women from the Naqab, five interviews with women from the central Galilee, two with women from the northern Galilee, and one interview with a woman from the "Triangle" region of the country. Of the men, three were from the Naqab, three from the Galilee, and one hailed from the Triangle. In its second phase, five focus groups were held with people from different segments of society, primarily women. Some of them were local groups, where the participants came from the geographical area in which the focus group took place. A further group brought together participants from different areas of the country. One focus group was held with unmarried women in Nazareth; another with housewives from the Triangle and Galilee; one group with housewives in the village of Lagiyya in the Naqab; a further group with housewives in Nazareth; and a final group with male and female social workers from the Nazareth area. The focus groups sought to investigate attitudes and opinions on polygamy and to analyze the prevailing discourse on the issue within Palestinian society. The number of participants in each group ranged between 15-20 participants, and more in some groups.

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The main themes of the interviews conducted with the women were as follows:

1. The pre-marital family background of the wife: her birthplace, upbringing, childhood, and the educational and professional opportunities and resources available to her.
2. The story of the marriage: the decision to marry, her concept of married life prior to the marriage, the realities of her married life, her level of economic and social independence, and her role in the marriage and the extent to which she participates in making decisions concerning her married life.
3. *In the case of first wives,* an examination of life as a woman whose husband has another wife/wives: the reasons given by the woman for marrying her husband, her reaction to her husband's decision to marry another woman, and her attitude towards the current situation.
4. *In the case of second wives,* the reasons that brought her to accept marriage to a married man, and how that decision was taken: the motives, who encouraged it, who opposed it, and who took the decision.
5. The difficulties faced by women after marriage, both in terms of self and society, the attitude of those around them towards their situation and its effect on how they negotiate it.
6. The effects of these difficulties on family life and on the children.
7. The obstacles women face in their married lives and the resources women need to enable them to cope with it in various ways (from the perspective of the women themselves).

The main themes of the interviews with the men were as follows:

1. Family and social background: his birthplace and childhood, upbringing; the educational and professional opportunities and resources available to him; and his economic situation and financial resources as a man and a husband.
2. The decision to marry the first time, and his concept of marriage and married life.
3. The man's attitude towards polygamy in general and his own marriage in particular; the motives to which he ascribes the decision to marry for a second time; and the factors that encouraged him to take this step.
4. Society's attitude towards his decision: who encouraged him, and who attempted to influence him not to take this step;
5. His economic situation and financial resources as a man and a husband and their impact on his decision.
6. Life as the husband of multiple wives: the advantages and difficulties he encounters as a husband and father, and his view on the extent to which his polygamy influences his family life and children.

The main themes of the focus groups were as follows:

1. The participants' attitudes towards polygamy.
2. What they regard as legitimate or acceptable reasons for practicing polygamy, and the extent to which they accept these reasons.

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3. The conditions they believe should obtain to enable and facilitate the establishment of a polygamous family.
4. The participants' attitudes towards Israeli law (which prohibits polygamy) and towards Islamic *Shari'a* law (which permits it).
5. The participants' attitudes towards other issues relating to women's rights, such as education, employment and personal freedoms.

Research findings

The current chapter presents some of the key findings of the research. It interweaves the in-depth interviews and personal experiences of individuals who live in polygamous marriage arrangements with society's attitudes toward the practice, as brought to light in the focus groups.

The interviews with the women

The reasons given by the women for their husbands' polygamous marriages

According to the findings, the women participants cited three reasons for their husbands' decision to marry another woman.

The first reason, cited by a number of the women, was attributed to his lack of maturity in dealing with the obligations of family life whereby polygamy constituted an attempt to evade the difficulties encountered in married life. They regarded their husband's second marriage as a betrayal and an affront to their dignity. The option of polygamy, as indicated by Al-Krenawi and Lev-Wiesel (2002), allows men to act out passing whims. The choice to marry another woman represents an attempt to evade marital difficulties entirely, whether disagreements over roles in the marriage, the division of labor between man and wife, sexual relations or financial problems. Such problems undoubtedly create friction on both sides. The availability of polygamy as an option enables many men to avoid dealing with them at all, to say nothing about trying to resolve them.

The second most salient reason cited by first wives for their husbands' decision to marry again was attributed to the lack of children in the marriage, specifically boys. In a society in which the family is the central institution in the individual's life, upon which he or she depends upon almost entirely for protection and survival, a large family is an expression of one's control and influence, and must be pursued, regardless of whether women and children fall victim in the process.

On this point, one interviewee, "Zahra," who gave birth to a daughter before her husband went on to marry another woman, stated:

> *I told him to go and get whoever he wants and do whatever he wants. I said our daughter was more than enough and that he was free to do whatever he wanted. He told me that he wanted to get married again and that I should find him a bride.*

The third reason, according to some of the wives — in particular those in the Naqab — is the encouragement other men gave their husbands to marry another woman, on the ground that polygamy is a sign of masculinity. This issue came up in several of the focus groups, including the group of women from the Naqab, where the participants cited the social pressure that men face from other men to marry another woman as one of the key reasons why men marry again. One woman in the group articulated it as follows:

> *Men encourage each other. They tell each other, for example, that if they get married then the furniture is on them or they'll give them a thousand dollars. And if they say they don't have the money they tell them that they'll give them a thousand dollars, and someone else says the furniture is on them and they'll pay for his suit. Basically, they'll support him if he just gets married. And if he doesn't get married they start saying that his wife is his boss. So men end up getting married just because other men tell them to.*

Arab men live in a context where they do not possess sources of genuine power, either economic or political. The wounded and politically excluded Arab man therefore seeks to restore his "manliness" in the private sphere. In a socio-political context in which he has been rendered impotent, he thus falls for the illusion of control promised by this arrangement, one that seems to promise a space in which he will be able to express the authority that is off limits to him in the public sphere. It can be said that the men in these situations have placed their bets on the "sure thing" that is the domination of women; the ease with which they can do this is thus a sign of the "manliness" that has otherwise been denied them.

"Second wives" gave three reasons for agreeing to marry a married man.
The first was largely individual: their desire to escape parental authority, or the need for love. As one of the women participants, "Salma," an older woman whose family, especially the men, continued to control and restrict her life despite her financial independence and professional achievements, stated:

> *There were problems with my brothers. One of them used to really bother me and was always asking me where I was going. He was hard on me, constantly asking what I was doing and looking at his watch. He sometimes beat me. I wasn't allowed to stay out late. He'd keep asking who was calling me or why I'd done my hair in a certain way.*

The second reason, raised by one of the participants, is that it is necessary for women in society to be married, even if it is to a "half-man," or in the words of a popular saying, "better the shade of a man than the shade of a wall." Such a marriage is often the only choice for a woman who has been deprived of an education and employment, who is not financially independent, and whose family treats her as a financial and social burden. It is through marriage alone that she can gain status, respect, and secure a livelihood. In terms of their educational and social background, most of the women participants who were

second wives had not completed secondary school (only three of the participants completed secondary school and another had a bachelor's degree). In their early lives they were subject to double discrimination: deprivation of an education and prevention from entering the public sphere (the patriarchal oppression by the community of which they are victims as Palestinian women), coupled with the denial of access to educational institutions, especially in unrecognized villages (the products of state discrimination against its Palestinian minority). One of them regarded her "sun-filled" childhood and the arduous journey to school as the worst of the barriers she faced. She and her classmates had to walk for an hour and a half to reach school in the village of Deir al-Asad, a journey on which they were exposed to serious and even life-threatening dangers, especially on harsh winter days. She was later forced to stop studying and was left without a degree, marketable skills or any opportunities for employment.

The third reason for marriage to an already-married man can be encapsulated by another popular saying quoted by another participant: "Rather an old man who spoils me than a young man who humiliates me." The woman in question had been through a difficult experience in her first marriage to a violent man whom she divorced after a few months of marriage. She then consented to marry a man whose wife was childless.

These personal experiences were paralleled in the discussion between the group of unmarried women, where, more than any of the other focus groups, there were voices in favor of polygamy and a more supportive discourse regarding the phenomenon. Such support stems from the personal situations of the participants themselves, who regarded polygamy as a practice offering them the opportunity to get married after all other opportunities for marriage have passed them by. Marrying an already-married man is the only option that remains open to them to ensure themselves a means of support and provide for their emotional, sexual and material needs. In addition, polygamy becomes the only solution for older women in a society that considers women's virginity to be the province of the family, not a personal choice — an attitude that lies at the heart of the full gamut of sexual issues and drives in the community, and one that underlies virtually all other societal behaviors. This attitude was also reflected in the focus groups, where virginity was hailed by many as a sacred and inviolable value. In this light, accepting polygamy is a testament to a woman's chastity and purity. As one of the women proudly announced, her decision to marry (an already-married man) set her apart from her friends, who had had extra-marital sexual relations.

Society's reaction to polygamy from the standpoint of the wives

Most of the wives perceive that society around them has accepted their marriages, and/or treats each second wife as a legitimate wife. The level of acceptance was shown to vary from locale to locale — ranging from acceptance with some degree of reservation to considerable support and encouragement. Despite this, even where polygamous marriages were met with disapproval or at least reservation, these did not translate into support for the first wife in her demands that her husband divorce his second wife, but rather into attempts to

convince her that the only solution is to learn to live with the new situation and accept her husband as a man who has two wives. In other cases, the surrounding community outright encouraged polygamy. Traditionally, Muslim society gives men free license to marry another woman in cases where the first wife is childless or has not given birth to boys. In these cases the immediate family is the main catalyst and source of pressure for the man to marry another woman. On this point "Najwa", who had given birth to a daughter (and then turned out to be pregnant just as her husband was preparing to marry another woman) said:

> *His family helped him a lot to prepare for the marriage, even with the house; he lives with them. They helped him out and stood by him, saying that he wasn't going to be left without a son. They said that I was taking a long time to have more children. They used that as an excuse.*

The discussions in the focus groups produced similar findings to the personal experiences the women touched upon. While most people were opposed to polygamy in general, there were people in each of the focus groups who thought that polygamy was legitimate in certain cases — first and foremost if the wife could not have children, though also in cases where a wife was ill or had failed to perform her duties towards her husband. These views in turn raised a number of disagreements and accusations of their proponents' maintaining "double standards", and caused major controversy in all the discussions, giving rise to a certain amount of conflict and even confusion. At times the same participants stated the opinion that polygamy was an unacceptable practice that reflected the domination of men and their lack of responsibility towards their marriage and familial relations, while at others they would deem it acceptable and justifiable for a man to have multiple marriages in certain circumstances (with the blame and responsibility for these laid on women). Interestingly, this type of justification found support among male professionals who participated in the social workers' focus group, specifically among those men who took part in the discussion and who seemed to hold patriarchal views. By contrast, the women professionals were all wholly opposed to any legitimization of polygamy.

The personal and societal difficulties of living as a wife in a polygamous marriage arrangement

The findings reveal that women experience gross material and emotional neglect, both to themselves and to their children, and that the common factor that unites them all is the pain they suffer as a result of these unions. The suffering of the women from the Naqab was particularly acute, and they were the most badly affected by the neglect they described. The material and emotional neglect to which wives and children are subjected by husbands who leave the family home and move in with a second wife, shirking their responsibility towards their wives and children, was obvious. Most of the women considered their husbands to be absent or dead, and tended to regard themselves as divorcees or widows who had to cope with the difficulties, burden and responsibilities of life alone, with no real partner to share them with. Significantly, such neglect is not the sole preserve of the first wife and her

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children, but can also extend to "second wives." "Najwa" summed up this issue with the following words:

> *I live alone… I consider myself a widow.*

Most of the wives referred to an absence of parental, moral and material support in the lives of their children, and to the consequences of this absence for the psychological welfare of their children and their social, emotional and educational development. They gave numerous examples of painful, upsetting and agonizing situations in which they routinely found themselves in their daily lives. In discussing the psychological impact on children, for instance, "Mai" recounted an incident that had happened to her daughter around a year ago when she was in the fifth-grade:

> *My daughter is a strong and brave girl who isn't scared or bothered by anyone. A girl taunted her at school and they fought in front of the whole school. The girl told her to get lost, that at least her father wasn't married to another woman and at least they were living with their father. My daughter lost it. She went up to the girl and grabbed by the hair and scratched her down the face. She had kept all her anger bottled up inside and took it out on this girl. She was suspended from school for three days… it's still so painful for them even today.*

It was plain that the position of the wife towards polygamy in general — and the specific reasons to which wives ascribe their marriage to their husbands — have a clear impact on how they deal with their marital relations. Wives who regard polygamy as a humiliating practice that degrades women and think that their husbands married other women in order to avoid having to deal with the tribulations of married life and responsibilities towards their family were firmly opposed to their husbands' remarrying. Their standpoint was reflected in the dynamic of marital relations that they described as having emerged between themselves and their husbands — notably their refusal to engage in any kind of sexual relationship with their husbands, despite repeated attempts to resume sexual relations on the latter's part. Women who regarded polygamy as a religiously permissible practice for men and a social custom that cannot be challenged, objected instead to their husbands' unjust conduct, though not the institution in general. They maintained their marital relationship and were submissive in their relationships with their husbands. However, this submissiveness did not alleviate their pain and suffering and sometimes increased their psychological distress, bringing them to waver between refusal and submission, and causing their behavior to swing from one extreme to the other. Sometimes the women resumed their marital lives, in a heroic display of the obedience compliance and submission demanded of women within the patriarchal order. At other times they rejected this role and vigorously demanded that their husbands to leave their second wives — only to be swept up into a firestorm of conflict, their lives engulfed in tension and instability.

As in the in-depth interviews, it was not apparent from the focus group discussions that the women had alternate interpretations of the Quranic verses that permit polygamy; rather, it seems that they dealt with this religious legitimization as an incontrovertible fact with no room for interpretation. The research findings reveal that women in society have not adopted a critical stance towards the prevailing reading of religious doctrine which legitimizes polygamy, or have entertained the possibility of challenging it. The fact that the women involved in the research seemed afraid to voice their objections to these interpretations (or to adopt alternative interpretations that set bounds on this legitimization) makes the case for polygamy as a social stricture that is only cloaked in the guise of religion.

Fears regarding the breakdown of the polygamous marriage

The findings show that even though women were thoroughly unsatisfied with their polygamous arrangements, the majority were fearful to leave these marriages out of fear of a number of obstacles, both personal and societal. First and foremost was the fear of becoming a divorcée, a product of the severe stigma surrounding divorced women in Palestinian society. As a consequence, most women seemed to prefer to remain married to a man who has more than one wife than to become a divorcee, with all the negative consequences it entails for her own life and the lives of her children. In addition, those women who considered divorce and sought to divorce their husbands could not look to the support of their own families, who tended to dissuade them, attempting instead to persuade them to go back to their husbands. The economic dependency of most of the women on their husbands and their lack of financial independence also hindered many women from taking the decision to divorce. Some limited mention was made of the discrimination which Arab women face vis-à-vis national institutions. Such discrimination can, for example, leave them stripped of their rights to financial support from the National Insurance Institute; unlike their Jewish counterparts, these single mothers, the sole breadwinners in the family may have little state assistance to look forward to. Finally, the failure of the executive authorities to implement Israeli law against men who practice polygamy remains a major obstacle in the battle against polygamy. The findings reveal that women whose husbands marry other women are not able to turn to the police due to the high price they stand to pay in terms of being rejected by their husbands' families, ousted and divorced.

The interviews with the men

The position of men towards polygamy and their reasons for marrying more than one woman

There were two important assumptions underlying the reasons given by the male participants for practicing polygamy. The first was a total consensus among male participants that the practice of polygamy was legitimate for men under religious law. On this basis, participants stated that polygamy was their right in addition to being an accepted practice. The second assumption present in virtually all discussions by male participants around the subject of polygamy was

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that the man is the axis of the family. In all discussion surrounding their families, men placed themselves at the center, and justified polygamy and the reasons for it in terms of their own needs and wishes. They described their polygamous arrangements as a family situation that provided them with a better family life — without discussing at all the position or possible wishes of their wives. In most cases they denied that there were any problems or suffering on the part of their wives resulting from the arrangement. Whether implicitly or explicitly, all of the men participating underscored the belief that they were the guardians of women. They treated women as objects in the marriage, employed patriarchal justifications in legitimizing their marriages, and did not tend to view the marital relationship as a mutual human relationship that brings a man and a woman together on the basis of equality.

The reasons to which men ascribed polygamy were manifold. The first was marital disputes with their first wives, where polygamy constituted a compromise between the father's duty towards his children and family and his desire for a happy and stable marital relationship. It also avoided recourse to divorce, which according to one of the participants, "Omar," was harmful to the family and children.

It appears that in some cases, polygamy is employed as a means of avoiding divorce, which society views with opprobrium. "Omar," who is 37 years old, married at 21. The marriage was arranged by his family and was imposed on him – as it had been on a number of other participants – as "a means of protecting the economic interests of the family." He was not thinking about marriage at the time, nor was he convinced that the wife his family chose for him was right for him. Many arguments broke out between him and his fiancée during their two-year engagement and he considered calling it off several times. However, his family pressured him not to do so. Omar received no guidance from his family and no encouragement to break off the engagement. The arguments continued and worsened after the marriage, leading him to consider marrying another woman as a way of leading the happy married life he had been unable to achieve with his first wife, with whom he had fathered four children. "Omar" therefore viewed his decision to marry more than one wife as a compromise between his wish for a happy married life and his domestic duties towards his family and children.

The issue of early marriages that are forced on both men and women came up in the focus groups as a reason why many of the men subsequently went in search of a marriage of their own choosing, beyond that imposed on them by their families. Participants from the Naqab also raised the fact that young women from their region are not allowed to choose a life partner from outside their tribe or from a tribe of a lower status than their own. As these young women age, many of them are compelled to marry a married man from within their own tribe. In most of the focus groups, participants seemed to reach a consensus that society does not help individuals, men or women, to develop a mature understanding of marriage based on participation and equality between the partners. Rather, it internalizes a flawed and distorted picture of marriage of which polygamy is the most egregious manifestation.

The second reason cited by the men for marrying again was the encouragement they received from society, in particular from their friends and relatives. Such encouragement prompted one of the male participants to take a second wife in order to prove his manliness to other men and as evidence of his power and strength. This issue was more strongly in evidence in the Naqab, where polygamy is most prevalent. One of the women who gave an in-depth interview attributed her husband's decision to marry another woman to the backing he received from his friends and relatives. One of the men described his motives for marrying for a second time as follows:

> *Whenever the family gets together there's a big discussion. We were all sitting in the tent talking about second marriages. Someone told me that I should get married. I told them to bring me a bride and I'd marry her... It was a mistake, done out of curiosity, as a joke. I said it not knowing what I'd let myself in for. I tried to find a reason to break off the engagement, but you know how it is with family honor. It was very, very difficult.*

This reason also came up in the focus groups, where participants stated there was a growing social context that encourages men to practice polygamy. Reference was also made in the focus groups to the encouragement given by Muslim clergymen and Imams for polygamy, and to a rise in new religious *fatwas* issued in the Naqab, as well as in the Triangle and the Galilee, that call on married men to marry another unmarried woman, in the guise of religion. This call has apparently had a major impact on the growth of the phenomenon of polygamy.

The third prevalent reason for marrying again among men was given by "Salah," one of the men. According to him, it was the age of his wife, who, after several years of marriage was no longer able to satisfy his needs, that stood behind his decision. Underlying his claim was his rationale that a wife's role is to serve her husband and take care of his physical and sexual needs. In cases where a wife is unable (or about to be unable) to fulfill these needs, it becomes the husband's right to marry another woman, regardless of the humiliation such a step entails for the first wife.

A fourth reason raised cited local levirate tradition: the custom of marrying the widow of a brother in order to provide a solution for his children. In such cases polygamy is a legitimate situation that enables the wife to stay in her husband's family home with her children and not have to return to her family home. The polygamous marriage keeps the new family unit intact, while maintaining property and children within the husband's extended family.

A fifth reason was that echoed by many of the first wives: polygamy enables men to have more children in cases where their first wives have only given birth to a single child.

A sixth reason, which echoed the recommendations of polygamy on the grounds of its preservation of moral chastity, was cited by one of the male participants as his reason for marrying again: by providing him with a second wife the union had strengthened him sexually, preventing him from entering into extra-marital relations with other women. Here the majority of the men seemed to maintain a belief in the strength of their own sexual drives compared to those of women — a belief that seemed to be based on what they cited as biological differences and a belief that the sexual activity and needs of men are greater than those of women, which diminish or evaporate after childbirth.

> *I don't think women who become mothers and have been through childbirth have a normal level of sexual desire as their husbands do. After giving birth and with all the worries of raising the children sex becomes a low priority for them.*

Another husband added the following:

> *When a woman has given birth two or three times she no longer has time for her husband, only for her children. And so men today see things in the street, on television and everywhere else that excite him sexually, and they want to satisfy their desires. They need a solution for the things they see in the street and on the television, and they'll look for it either in a permitted or an illicit place. Some men aren't satisfied by one woman, especially once they have had children. That's why it's permissible for men to marry four wives.*

This discourse, as described by Abu Zayd (1999), reduces human existence to the biological being and turns the issue into one of "male and female," rather than "man and woman," with all the associated cultural, social and historical dimensions. It is restricted to mechanisms of debate that employ arguments cloaked in a religious discourse, and that confine the discussion within a narrow framework – that of what is permissible and what is illicit. It limits the solution to two antithetical extremes: either the legalization of adultery or the legalization of polygamy. In fact, this discourse leads to a denial of women as human beings and to their replacement with the "female", and in so doing transforms the marital unit into a sexual unit. Men become sexual beings who assign the women within this unit the function of fulfilling only the sexual needs of men. The concept of marriage and sexual relations, with all its emotional elements, is thus reduced to a merely instinctual sexual act.

This discourse has several dimensions. First of all, the men discussed differences in gender roles, not biological roles – which do not relate to differences in sexual needs but to stereotypes of women and men – without being aware of the distinction between the two. Nor did they consider that it is the failure to rewrite gender roles and the failure of the man/father to assume the role of care-giver that leaves many wives physically exhausted and less sexually active. Secondly, this discourse puts men in a blatant contradiction. On the one hand, the woman/wife is portrayed as sexually passive and unable to fulfill her husband's needs, thereby necessitating polygamy. On the other hand, however, women are

depicted as sexually active because they tempt men. Women are seductive and deceptive, while men are more sensitive and susceptible to their temptations. This depiction stands in conflict with the philosophy of men's guardianship over women, which has been adopted by men and used as a basis for considering themselves superior to women in their mental faculties and life skills, and therefore more adept at managing their own affairs and those of women. According to this philosophy the quality of "emotional" is stereotypically attributed to women, as opposed to the "rationality" of men; they are, however, unable to find an explanation for the disappearance or ineffectiveness of this rationality when confronted with the seductiveness of women.

Mernissi (2001: 17) explains this contradiction through what can be described as an "explicit" and "implicit" theory of sexual life, i.e. a dual theory of gender dynamics. The first theory finds expression in the currently prevalent belief that the sexual lives of men are active in nature, while those of women are passive. The "implicit" theory, suppressed within the Islamic subconscious, is evident in the seminal work of Imam Ghazali, *The Revival of Religious Sciences*, who writes that civilization is an endeavor that seeks to contain the destructive and overwhelming power of women. "Women must therefore be controlled to prevent men from being distracted from their social and religious duties, and society can only survive by creating institutions that foster male domination through segregation of the sexes and polygamy for believers."

The findings of the research show that this attitude, which men and indeed the whole of society harbor towards women, involves a stereotyped division embedded within the male mentality in which women are split into two categories: passive and "virtuous", and sexually active and "seductive". This division is rooted in the patriarchal mentality and derives from the complete separation established between love and sexuality by the patriarchal regime, which regards sexual pleasure as a relationship between equals, and not as a means of imposing hierarchy, authority and control, and hence of dehumanization. Men thus transform the discourse which supports polygamy as a means of countering the seduction, lust and infatuation to which women subject men, into a discourse that treats femininity as akin to devilry. It turns it into something that drives the instincts and evokes infatuation, thus allowing men to dodge responsibility for their inability to keep their sexual instincts in check, and leaves polygamy as the only solution.

Society's attitude towards men's decisions to practice polygamy from the perspective of men and their views of polygamous married life

In the in-depth interviews the men emphasized that the decision to marry another woman had been theirs alone, and that they had not taken into account the opinions or objections of the first wife, or the views of other people, close or distant, who were against it. Thus all the men adopted the strategy of creating a *fait accompli*, based on a supposition that the first wife – regardless of her initial objections – had no choice in the matter but to comply and accept the decision forced on her by the husband. Most of the men believe that society accepts their polygamous marriages, and only two of the men referred to any reservations or

opposition they encountered. Others attempted to deny there was any opposition, stressing that the decision to marry another woman was exclusively theirs, and that they did not allow anyone to influence them. One of the participants reported receiving active encouragement. Moreover, the men did not regard Israeli law as an obstacle or problem. The law did not give them any misgivings about their decision to marry a second wife, and they expressed no fear of being punished by law. Instead, they all circumvented the law by not officially registering their second marriage. Thus recognition by society was the critical factor for them.

Like those who gave in-depth interviews, the men in the focus groups did not raise the subject of Israeli law and did not treat it as an obstacle. The law did not figure prominently in the discussion, which is not coincidental, since for Palestinian society, Israeli law is largely absent and neither men nor women participating in the study attached much importance to it. Quite simply, Israeli law is inert and not implemented, and has no obvious impact on the phenomenon of polygamy. It is not a major concern for society, or for men who consider polygamy. Furthermore, the women who are faced with their husbands' polygamy do not view the law as a means of securing their rights.

Married life from the perspective of polygamous men

In examining the attitudes of the husbands towards polygamous married life, the study also revealed a large disparity between what they described and what the women described. While the women described a sense of humiliation and expressed considerable pain and neglect of themselves and their children in all respects, most of the male participants presented their married lives as positive and normal. They even spoke of the advantages of living in a polygamous arrangement, which they attributed to their strength of character as husbands and their ability to manage the arrangement well. All of the male participants stressed that polygamy and creating a good living arrangement were matters for men, and that a wise man can overcome any problems and construct an effective, well-functioning polygamous system. The men did not perceive their polygamy as degrading or as a cause of pain and suffering to their wives so long as they practiced it fairly. Hence it seems the fairness to which they refer is financial and not emotional or sexual fairness, which, according to the men, they are not obliged to provide. And while the men described fulfilling their duties towards their wives and families to the full, the standards that all the men cited as evidence of their success at polygamy were extremely traditional and stereotyped. The division of roles and tasks that they portrayed indicates that the role of guardian over the children falls squarely on the wife's shoulders. The husbands' concern for their children and for performing their paternal duties well revolves around control and providing for the practical needs of their children, without attending to their emotional needs and without there being an equal division of responsibilities based on partnership between man and wife in raising and caring for the children.

The men expressed a deeply-rooted patriarchal mentality towards the concept of marriage, relations with women and married life, of which the institution of

polygamy is the most extreme manifestation. The findings reveal a large gap between the expectations that women and men have of the marital relationship. Thus while women crave a marital relationship based on respect, partnership and intimacy, men treat the institution of marriage as a functional social system in which the woman exists to meet their basic needs, without recognizing it as an emotional space or seeing the need to invest in it. Accordingly, most of the men viewed polygamy as an arrangement that effectively meets their needs, and referred to its benefits and elegance, at times to the point of infatuation. Women, on the contrary, described it as a dehumanizing system that ruins their lives and the lives of their children.

Despite all the difficulties cited by the women participants, some of them have managed to break down the barriers that stood before them and gained autonomy in which to raise their children and lead their lives. Some of the women also acquired financial independence by working outside the home. It is important to note here the role played by feminist organizations active within the Palestinian minority in supporting women in various fields. The study thus highlighted the important role played by feminist organizations in general, specifically in the fields of education, awareness-raising on rights and social issues and in work with individuals. One of the women participants discussed the legal advocacy undertaken on her behalf by a feminist organization during her divorce proceedings. The complaint she filed with the police against her husband represents one example of an institutional mechanism with an important role to play in assisting women in breaking the cycle of powerlessness and sharpening their resolve to change their reality and realize their rights. In a society in which the discriminatory discourse against women in the name of tradition is becoming ever more vehement, this work is becoming increasingly more challenging.

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