

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO POLYGAMY IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA: ISSUES, PROBLEMS AND PROSPECT

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Abstract

This research examines how Christians in contemporary Nigeria respond to polygamy, a practice where one man has multiple wives. Polygamy has a long history in many African cultures, but its acceptance among Christians raises important questions about family, gender roles, and society. This study identifies key issues related to polygamy, such as its effects on family dynamics and gender equality, and how it fits with Christian teachings about marriage and loyalty. Using interviews and surveys, the research explores the views of church leaders, church members, and scholars, showing a wide range of opinions from strong opposition to cautious acceptance. The paper also discusses the challenges the church faces in dealing with these differing views and the need for open conversations within Christian communities. This research suggests ways to address the issues related to polygamy, highlighting the importance of caring for individuals, educating communities, and engaging with cultural practices. Ultimately, it aims to help Christians find meaningful ways to respond to the challenges of polygamy while promoting love and unity in families. The methods of data collection in this research is both primary and secondary sources, such as previous works of foreign and local authors who have written on the relevant issues in journals, books of reading, internet documentaries and lecture notes. The primary sources include both participant and non-participant methods of observation.

Keywords: Polygamy, Contemporary, Issues, Nigeria, Problems, Prospect

Introduction

Polygamy, defined as the practice of having more than one spouse simultaneously, has long been a topic of debate in contemporary Nigeria, particularly within Christian communities. Historically, polygamy has been a common practice in various African cultures, serving social, economic, and cultural purposes (Adetunji, 2019). However, the rise of Christianity in Nigeria has introduced new perspectives on marriage, emphasizing monogamy as the ideal form of relationship based on biblical teachings (Okonkwo, 2020). As Nigeria grapples with diverse cultural practices and religious beliefs, the issue of polygamy poses significant challenges for the church and its followers. Many Christians find themselves caught between traditional customs that support polygamy and doctrinal teachings that advocate for monogamous relationships (Uche, 2021). This tension raises questions about family structure, gender equality, and the role of the church in addressing these issues (Okwudili, 2022). In recent years, as societal norms evolve and the influence of globalization increases, the Christian response to polygamy has become more varied and complex. Some church leaders firmly reject the practice, citing biblical scriptures that promote monogamy (Nwosu, 2021), while others adopt a more nuanced approach, recognizing the realities faced by individuals in polygamous marriages and advocating for pastoral care rather than condemnation (Chukwu, 2023). This paper seeks to explore the multifaceted responses of Christians to polygamy in Nigeria, identifying the key issues and problems arising from this practice. By examining the perspectives of church leaders, congregants, and scholars, the study aims to provide a clearer understanding of how Christianity can engage with the challenges posed by polygamy while promoting values of love, respect, and unity in families. Ultimately, this research will contribute to ongoing discussions about the intersection of faith, culture, and social norms in contemporary Nigerian society.

Conceptual Framework

Concept of Marriage

Marriage has been in existence from time immemorial. The practice of marriage is apparently one of the most interesting aspects of human culture. Olarinmoye and Alimi (2017) observe that the study of marriage has been considered as one of the most interesting aspects of anthropological studies. Marriage as a fundamental social

institution is more than a mere contract. Through the institution of marriage, men and women unite their lives, establish families, and become a fundamental component of a community. Spouses acquire a special relationship to each other and to society. That is why marriage has long received attention in behavioural sciences as a key demographic event serving as a near-universal marker of entry to adulthood and customarily the point at which childbearing commences. Marriage has, despite the recorded shifts, significant value for the individual, families and the society. Nock (2005) elucidates that when looking at marriage as an institution, as opposed to a free-standing concept, marriage represents socially sanctioned behaviour. Marriage embraces traditionally virtuous, legal and predictable assumptions concerning what is moral and what is proper. Through marriage an individual is transformed; they are perceived and treated differently by society and even enjoy right/privileges unmarried individuals do not. Married couples are perceived as more mature, stable, committed and responsible hence, are allowed by their parents to take decisions by themselves.

Moreover, the etymology of marriage is traced to the Middle English, *marriage* which was also a derivative of Old French *marier* which means to marry. *Marier* is also derived from a Latin word *maritare*, meaning to be provided with a wife or husband (Ogoma, 2014). Carter and McGoldrick (1989) have suggested that marriage really represents the merger of two entire systems combining together in developing a new, third family system. Marriage is agreement between two families. After agreement and acceptance by the family lady, they hand their daughter over to the husband's family.

Nmah (2012) explains marriage is the state in which men and women can live together in sexual relationship with the approval of their social group. Marriage could be regarded as covenant between man and woman. It is a divine agreement or sacred bond or contract involving a plurality of persons with certain goals. Based on the above definition, Umeanolue (2011) elucidates that marriage is a sacred bond between a man and a woman because it unites the husband and the wife to become one body and one soul. Chiegboka (2006) states that marriage is sacred because it is an institution that is both natural to man and divinely established and ordained by God from the very foundation of human race. Chiegboka points out that God is the originator of marriage. Fletcher (1973) conceptualizes marriage as "the union between a man and a woman. In the words of Obi (2001), the union (marriage) between a man and a woman is for duration of man's life. Obi's view is from the fact that marriage between a man and a woman is a life time union. Also, as a union between two opposite sex, marriage creates room for procreation. Odunze (1982) opines that marriage is seen as God's calculated permanent union between man and woman that might be helpful and useful to one another. According to the view of Rahner (1975), marriage is a sexual fellowship, the structure of which varies considerably according to general social conditions. Thus, marriage is a religious and social institution by which a man and a woman are legally united and established as a new family. It is a voluntary union of a man and a woman for the purposes of helping each other and procreation.

Proceeding further, marriage is described as the process whereby a man and a woman come together to form a union for the purpose of procreation (Ayisi, 1997). The import of this definition is that where there are no children, there is no marriage. Ayisi's line of thought is focused only on bearing of children. Marriage in Nza Ozubulu cosmology is beyond Ayisi's idea as marriage involves mutual relationship and affection between the man and the woman, and also good relationship between the two families involved. Marriage unites and strengthens relationship between people, families and ethnic groups both socially, politically and economically.

In view of this, Farley (1994) states that marriage as a socially approved arrangement, usually between a male and a female that involves an economic and sexual relationship. According to Beattie (1980), marriage as a union between a man and a woman such that the children to the woman are the recognized legitimate offspring of both partners. Smith and Preston (1982) on their part conceptualized marriage to be an enduring socially approved sexual and economic relationship between at least two persons. A more acceptable definition of marriage was stated by Mike Murdock cited in Ingiabuna, Olumati and Sele (2003) who explained marriage as the socially approved union of a sexual cohabiting pair called husband and wife through which the offspring derive their legitimacy. From the foregoing, it is deducible that the conventional definition of marriage is that it is a union between a man and a woman such that children born to the woman are recognized as legitimate offspring of both parents.

However, Okodudu (2010) asserts that the idea of marriage has changed in recent times. In much of the Western European countries, marriage has been conceptualized as a union between two consenting adults irrespective of their sexes with or without approval from their parents of family; hence same sex marriages are being contracted today without the possibility of having children, except that it is a relationship between two consenting adults that has been recognised by law. However, Jack-Jackson (2015) is of the opinion that in Nigeria, marriage remains a union of two consenting adults (male and female) but largely with the express support and approval of the

immediate families of the individuals involved in the relationship. Igbo quoted by Okodudu (2010) enunciates that marriage also confers upon a man various rights over a woman right in *uxorem* and rights to a woman as a mother that is, rights over her offspring which is called rights in *geneticem*.

Ingiabuna, et al. (2003) state that in most of Nigerian societies, marriage must meet the following basic prerequisites for it to be a valid marriage. Ingiabuna, et al. (2003) state that in most of Nigerian societies, marriage must meet the following basic prerequisites for it to be a valid marriage:

1. Involvement of the parents of couples sexual regulation and rules of incest.
2. Transfer of bride wealth or progeny transfer symbol of marriage contract.
3. Religious factor obtaining supernatural blessings from the church, mosque or shrines and so forth.

Marriage in the Old Testament

Marriage has its basis in religion because of its theological background especially in the Old Testament. According to Kaiser (1975), marriage was God's gift to men and woman. Umeanolue (2011) opines that its purpose was to satisfy the social nature of mankind, for Adam found out by experience that he was lonely without human companionship. God agreed with Adam's estimate, adding it is not good for the man to be alone' (Genesis 2:18). The relationship that this marriage initiated was regarded in the Old Testament as indissoluble. That is the point of view expressed in Genesis 2:24; Deuteronomy 22:19-29; Jeremiah 3:1, Hosea 3:1-3; and Malachi 2:10-16 (Umeanolue, 2011). The people of the Old Testament practiced different types of marriage including monogamy, polygamy and Levirate marriage. The marriage of Boaz and Ruth resembles that of Levirate marriage. Mckenzie (2002) defines levirate marriage as the law which obliged a brother to marry the widow of his deceased brother if the brother died without male issue. This was a custom prevalent all over the Ancient Near East.

Among the ancient Israelites, the only way to continue one's existence after death was through one's children. Absence of children, therefore, meant that one would cease to exist in Israel. According to Umeanolue (2011), in order to prevail such a tragedy, the levirate law provided that the deceased man's brother or closest male relative was to marry the deceased's widow so that the property or dowry as well as the fertility of the widow would be kept within the same patriarchal line. Such a practice made possible the continuation of the dead man's name and lineage in Israel as well as the retention of his property within the family. Among the Jews, marriage was however, highly honored.

The Jews saw marriage as holy responsibility. Consequently, they interpreted Genesis 1 and 2 as God's formal institution of marriage. The meaning of marriage and human sexuality is given in the narrative of God's creation of woman (Genesis 2:4-24). There the Old Testament text pointedly emphasizes the value and worth of man and woman in mutual relationship. As early as Genesis 2:27 man and woman were equally declared to be made in the image of God. The theological perspective of Genesis 2 is that God has created a garden for man's pleasure, animals to serve him, and women for companionship. Man's solitude and loneliness were declared to be a condition that was not good'. Man had been made to be a social being. Therefore, God made a 'helper suited to him' (Genesis 2: 20). Such a correspondence could not be found in the animals that were named by Adam and were subservient to him.

Marriage in Christian Context

It is necessary to examine marriage in Christian context. From the Christian perspective, marriage originated in the book of Genesis. For Christians, it is sacred because it is an institution that is both natural to man and divinely established and ordained by God from the very foundation of human race (Chiegboka, 2006). Chiegboka's idea points to the biblical origin of marriage which started in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2: 21-24). Christian marriage is conducted based on Biblical precepts on marriage. In Christian marriage commonly referred as Church wedding, the bride and bridegroom go to the alter to exchange rings and make the vows. They are given certificate by the priest. Christian marriage is monogamous in nature (1Tim. 3:2) and does not consider divorce as an option Mark 10:9 "What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder."

There are other distinctive features of Christian marriage. Love, confidence, trust and mutuality among couples as that which make marriage a reality. It is a holy institution that involves dowry, which is part of the norms of marriage. Once marriage is contracted, it cannot be repudiated; it is indissoluble and irresponsible (Nmah, 2012). In marriage spouses are equal partners, equal in rights and neither is inferior to the other. Though equal in rights, a wife is not equal to her husband in authority. For the man is the head of the family (Eph. 5:23). This is truly a Christian perspective of marriage which promotes monogamy, abhors divorce and made love and equality as the focal point in marriage.

Types of Marriage

There are various types of marriage. This research will explain these below:

Monogamy

This is a type of marriage between one man and one wife. It is the most preferred by European Christianity. This type of marriage was imported by the European Christian missionaries to Africa during Christian missionary enterprise. The missionaries kicked against indigenous culture of which polygamy was inclusive. They encouraged polygamists (husbands) to select one out of the many they married, wed with that one and send away others. This was a prerequisite to obtain Christian baptism, partake in the Lord's supper and as well qualification to hold positions in the mission Churches. This had negative impact on many married women who were at the receiving end.

Polygamy

This is a type of marriage or the practice of one person being married to two or more than one person at the same time, with the initial person being either male or female (Powell and Delecce, 2021). Africans were deeply rooted in polygamous marriage before the advent of Christianity. There were many reasons ranging from agricultural, political, cultural reason among others. As earlier noted above, it was vehemently opposed by the European Christian missionaries. However, with the rise of African Independent Churches, which incorporated some aspects of indigenous religion and culture into the Christian faith; polygamy was approved for their members. This made many women to quickly accept the new found faith.

Polygyny is the term used for the practice of one man having more than one wife at the same time (Powell and Delecce, 2021). This is different from the term polygamy which refers to the practice of one person being married to more than one person at the same time, with the initial person being either male or female. So, polygyny refers to men in particular while in polygamy it could be a man or a woman. The etymology of the term polygyny originated in the late 1700s. Broken down, *poly* means many and *-gyn* means woman, which signifies that polygyny means one man with many women.

In the practice of polygyny, while the men are married to multiple women, the women are only married and devoted to one husband. In essence, the women share one husband. The man is supposed to care for the women emotionally, financially, and sexually. As a father of many children, it is his responsibility to provide for the children's needs as well. The husband may live in the same house with all of the wives and children together. In some cases, the husband resides between two or more homes maintained by the individual wives. In other instances, the wives have designated days that they spend time with the husband. This is usually the case when the husband and the wives do not all live together.

There are two main types of polygyny: Sororal and non-sororal. Powell and Delecce (2021) explain that Sororal polygyny is the practice of one man being married to multiple biological sisters at the same time. Whether the husband and the co-wives (a group of women married to one man) live under the same roof or in different homes, the eldest sister is considered the head wife. Jacob married the two daughters of Laban.

Non-sororal polygyny is the practice of one man being married to at least two women at the same time, but the co-wives are not related to each other.

Historically, polygyny started from Ancient Near East, where Patriarch Jacob that is Israel married many wives including two sisters (Gen.29; 16-35), Moses married Zipporah and Ethiopian woman (Num. 12:1). King David had numerous wives, eight of which are named in scripture. However, after a battle at Hebron, he acquired several more wives and concubines (2 Samuel 5:13). His son, Solomon, had 700 wives many of which were of other religions and nationalities (I Kings 11:3). Despite the fact that the Bible recorded men who involved in polygyny marriage, Christianity is the religion responsible for ending the practice of polygyny in the western part of Europe (Powell and Delecce 2021).

However, despite the ban by Christianity, the practice of polygyny in some places are encouraged and accepted. According to Powell and Delecce (2021, today, 30.6% of cultures around the world are officially recognized as polygynous cultures. Most of these areas practice Islam as a religion. They include; parts of Africa- Nigeria and Congo, parts of Asia- Brunei and Pakistan, parts of the Middle East- Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia. It is worthy to note that polygyny is not only accepted in African Independent Churches alone, the Mormon (also referred to as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) belief system, polygyny is heavily practiced (Powell and Delecce, 2021).

Polyandry

This is a type of marriage where a woman is married by two or more husbands. This is the opposite of polygyny. This practice was dominant in parts of India and Tibet; Lele of central Africa. However, Atemie (1999) reported that this practice is also common among the Irigwe in Plateau State of Nigeria. Polyandrous marriages involving siblings is referred to as Fraternal or Adelpic polyandry. On the other hand, there is another variant called matriarchal polyandry where the woman stays at her house and her various husbands come to live with her in turns (Goldthorpe, 1981). It is also seen in some parts of Asia particularly India.

Gay or Same sex Marriage

Gay marriage is another trending type of marriage ongoing in the Western world. Here people of same sex marry. This could be traced from Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen.19:1-9). In African culture it is referred to as sodomy and such is taboo. Christianity rejects gay marriage on the ground that it is against the law of natural order and creation. Apostle made reference to this (Romans 1:26-27) with the sole aim of warning believers to desist from such ungodly act.

Group Marriage

As the name suggests, in this type of marriage, all men share marital relations with a group of women. This implies that a group of men and women are married to one another. They all share reciprocal obligations, as it is required in all marriages jointly. No one particular man owns a wife and vice versa (Okodudu, 2010). Schultz and Lavenda in Ingiabuna (2012) posit that group marriages are often encouraged by fraternities. The philosophy may be not to discriminate but to share everything in common including belongings, aspirations, and sex and marriage partners. Charles (2008) notes that the Oneida community of the 1960s in New York is often cited as one of such extreme fraternities that practiced group marriage, and who frowned at individual or single marriage partnership. To them single marriage thrives in selfishness and possessiveness, which were seen as sinful.

Levirate Marriage

This is a type of marriage where a widow is expected to marry her late husband's brother (Jack-Jackson 2015). The brother is then expected to extend all support to her as if she was his in the first place. Okodudu (2010) notes that there are different reasons for this kind of marriage arrangement; for example if the man had no child before dying, the younger brother can now raise children for him by marrying the widow. The children from such a union belong to the dead brother. In other words, the dead brother is the *pater* or social father, while the living brother (the wife's new husband is the genitor or biological father. Another important reason for this marriage arrangement is to forestall the situation where the woman could possibly move out with or without children to another family through remarriage. This kind of marriage is found among the Nuer of Southern Sudan and the Zulu of South Africa (Charles 2008), and also among the Ogonis and Igbo people of Nigeria.

This is similar to Levirate marriage but also has a difference. In widow inheritance marriage, Jack-Jackson (2015) explains that the brother, son or close relative of the deceased husband inherits the wife for the same reasons as highlighted in levirate marriage. In this case however, the widow is often requested to name the next-of-kin among the late husband's kinsmen whom she would want to live with as her husband. Nevertheless, children gotten from such a union belong to the new husband and not the dead husband, (Ingiabuna, 2012). Ingiabuna (2003) observes that it is practiced among the Ijos of the Niger Delta, this *Duere*. This marriage type is also common among the Ibos (sic), and Fulanis of Nigeria and some African and Asian societies (Jack-Jackson, 2015).

Ghost Marriage

Jack-Jackson (2015) vividly describes thus, this is a marriage arrangement whereby in order to perpetuate the name of a dead male member of a family, a living brother gets married to a woman on behalf of the dead brother who died a bachelor hence, never had an opportunity to get married or raise a family. In this case the wife is socially married to the dead man whom she probably never knew and the children born belongs to the dead man who is the *pater* (social father), while the living brother happens to be the genitor (biological father). This kind of marriage existed among the Nuer of Sudan studied by Evans-Pyrrichard in 1940 (Okodudu, 2010).

Woman-to-Woman Marriage

In this kind of marriage, a wealthy barren woman acquires a wife by performing all traditional rites and pay appropriate bride wealth. The woman becomes the husband while the lady being married becomes the wife. The female husband determines the manner of allocation of her sexual favours by screening and approving her sexual partners (Ingiabuna, 2012). Children born belong to the woman-husband who is the *pater* (social father) whereas; the man she arranged to raise children with the woman-wife is the genitor (biological father). This kind of marriage is sometimes practiced among the Efiks and Kalabaris of the Niger Delta (Jack-Jackson, 2015).

Gift or Charity Marriage

In this kind of marriage, parents give out one of their young daughters as a gift to their friends or patrons without any consideration as a demonstration of friendship, honour and total loyalty. In some African societies, the chiefs or kings enjoyed this honour and prerogative among subjects. Jack-Jackson (2015) observes that among the Hausa people, a girl might be given away to her father's friend or chiefs if she abuses her virginity. Furthermore, Jack-Jackson (2015) opines that among the Kanuri of Nigeria, a charity marriage could be contracted between a virgin girl and a Mallam in appreciation to a religious functionary who performed religious role to benefit the family members in areas like; medicine, prayers, divination. This practice has also been reported by Otite and Ogionwo (2005) to have been found among the Urhobos.

Child-to-Child Marriage

In this kind of marriage, parents of betrothed children make perfect the marriage pact as soon as the boy was of school age between 5-7 years. The children are formally married by their parents and allowed to grow under the watch for eyes of the parents. According to Charles (2008), this practice was found to have existed among the Oron people of Akwa Ibom State.

Pawn Marriage

This is a situation where a man cannot readily pay his creditor may give out his daughter as payment for debt owned. Okaba (2005) reports that among the Ijos, there was the practice of pawning girls maturing into puberty; she is espoused to the pawnbroker or his closest kin. In this situation there would be no payment of bride wealth and acceptance by the creditor relieves the debtor of his debts. However Ingiabuna (2004) states that among the Ijos, a father could not pawn away her daughter without an approval from her maternal uncle except in the case of high bridal transfer (*Opu-ekiye*) marriage systems.

Wife Capture/Elopement

This is a situation when a young suitor captures or elopes with a girl he intends to marry. Nwaozuru (2020) enunciates that this type of marriage is the act of forcefully taking a girl or woman to wife without fulfilling the martial rites and requirement of her people especially their native laws and customs. It is a situation where a man that has an intention to marry a girl or woman faces some manner of challenges ranging from issue of social class, to poverty, sickness, disease among others and chose to capture the bride even without her consent. Ingiabuna and Obara (2009) state that among the Ijos, a suitor may capture a daughter if the parents of the girl refuse him marriage to the girl. The suitor however, comes back later to properly marry the girl. Similarly, among the pre-colonial Tiv of Benue, a form of elopement was reported where a suitor successfully elopes with a man's daughter if the man refuses the suitor to marry his daughter (Jack-Jackson, 2015). Adekunle (2017) confirms that some of the Chibok girls abducted by Boko Haram in 2014 were forced to marry Boko Haram men.

Cross Cousin/Parallel Cousin Marriage

Cross and parallel cousin marriages are types of preferential and prescribed marriages. In preferential marriage, Jack-Jackson (2015) describes the societal law stipulates that a partner or close relative ought to marry another close relative in a particular generation or relationship, though it is not compulsory. On the other hand, marriage partners could be rigidly fixed by the culture for a man to take his spouse from among relatives in a given society. This is called prescribed marriage. In cross cousin marriage, the marriage is simply between children of siblings of opposite sex. Therefore this type of marriage could involve children of brothers and those of their sisters vice versa. In such marriage, the partners in marriage do not share the same patrilineage and they do not share inheritance. On the other hand, parallel cousin marriage involves children of siblings of same sex.

Theoretical Framework

Religious moralism theory is a framework that examines how religious beliefs and institutions shape moral values and societal norms. In the context of Christianity's response to polygamy in contemporary Nigeria, this theory explains how Christian teachings influence the way people perceive and react to polygamous practices. Christianity promotes monogamy as the ideal model for marriage, based on biblical texts such as 1st Timothy 3:2, which states that a church leader should be "the husband of one wife." This emphasis on monogamy contrasts sharply with the traditional acceptance of polygamy in many Nigerian cultures, where having multiple wives is often seen as a sign of wealth or social status. Religious moralism theory helps explain why Christians in Nigeria, guided by their faith, view polygamy as morally problematic. They see it as a practice that goes against the biblical understanding of marriage as a union between one man and one woman. This moral stance is reinforced by Christian teachings that promote equality, respect, and love within marriage, principles that polygamous arrangements can sometimes undermine by creating competition and conflict among co-wives. The influence of Christian moralism has also contributed to shaping legal and social attitudes toward marriage in Nigeria. In

Christian-majority regions, polygamy is often seen as outdated or incompatible with modern Christian values. Religious leaders preach against it, urging their followers to embrace monogamous relationships as a way to live in accordance with their faith. This theory is key to understanding how Christianity's moral framework opposes polygamy and seeks to guide believers toward a model of marriage that aligns with biblical principles.

Socio-Religious Ills and Challenges of Polygamy in Contemporary Nigeria

Polygamy in contemporary societies, presents numerous challenges that affect individuals, families, and society as a whole. These challenges range from gender inequality to economic burdens and psychological stress. The negative impacts of polygamy are especially pronounced in societies where monogamy is the cultural or religious norm, or where legal frameworks do not adequately address the complexities of polygamous families. Below is an extensive discussion of some of the major ills and challenges associated with polygamy.

Gender Inequality: One of the most significant challenges in polygamy is the inherent gender inequality it fosters. In most traditional polygamous systems, men are allowed to marry multiple women, while women are restricted to one husband. This practice reinforces patriarchal structures, where men hold more power and control over the family, while women are often treated as dependents or secondary. Polygamy tends to diminish the status of women, as they are viewed primarily through the lens of reproduction and domestic roles, rather than as equal partners in marriage. This inequality is especially evident when decisions within the family are made, as the husband's voice typically prevails over those of his wives. In contemporary Nigeria, where gender equality is increasingly emphasized, polygamy stands in stark contrast to efforts to promote women's rights and autonomy. Women in polygamous marriages often lack the same level of economic and social independence as those in monogamous relationships, further perpetuating cycles of dependency and inequality. This dynamic can also create a power imbalance that leaves women vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

Emotional and Psychological Strain: Polygamous marriages often lead to emotional stress, particularly among co-wives. The relationships between co-wives are frequently marked by rivalry, jealousy, and competition for the husband's attention and affection. This dynamic creates an environment of tension and conflict, which can have significant psychological consequences for the women involved. Each wife may feel neglected or undervalued, as the husband's time and resources are divided among multiple families. In some cases, this rivalry can escalate into open conflict, further straining familial bonds. The psychological strain is not limited to the wives; children in polygamous families may also suffer from emotional neglect. Fathers in polygamous marriages often have less time to spend with each of their children, leading to feelings of abandonment or favoritism among the children. This emotional neglect can result in long-term psychological issues, such as low self-esteem, anxiety, and difficulties forming healthy relationships later in life.

Economic Burden: The financial demands of supporting multiple wives and their children can place a significant economic strain on the husband. In many polygamous marriages, particularly in low-income settings, the husband may struggle to provide for all members of the family. The cost of maintaining multiple households, providing for children's education, healthcare, and daily needs, can quickly become overwhelming. This economic burden often leads to poverty, as resources are stretched too thin to meet the needs of the entire family. In some cases, the economic strain is exacerbated by the cultural expectation that a man must provide equally for all his wives and children. If the husband is unable to do so, this can lead to resentment and conflict within the family, further destabilizing the household. Women in polygamous marriages may have limited opportunities to contribute economically, as they are often confined to domestic roles, reducing the family's overall income potential.

Health Risks: Polygamy increases the risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) due to the nature of multiple sexual relationships. When a husband has multiple wives, the risk of transmission of infections increases, particularly if there are no strict health precautions or if the husband has extramarital relationships. This health risk is particularly concerning in regions where access to healthcare is limited, as infections may go untreated and lead to more serious health complications. The health of the wives and their children may suffer due to the economic strain of polygamy. In families where resources are limited, healthcare may become a lower priority, leading to inadequate prenatal and postnatal care for women, and poor health outcomes for children. The lack of financial stability can also limit access to nutritious food, clean water, and essential medicines, further exacerbating health risks.

Legal and Social Issues: Polygamy presents numerous legal challenges, especially in societies where it is illegal or not recognized by formal legal systems. In many countries, including Christian-majority areas of Nigeria, polygamous marriages are not legally recognized, which leaves co-wives and their children without legal protection. This lack of recognition can result in significant challenges when it comes to issues like inheritance,

property rights, and spousal support. For instance, if a man in a polygamous marriage dies without a will, disputes may arise over how his property and wealth should be divided among his wives and children. In some cases, co-wives may be left without any legal claim to the husband's estate, leading to legal battles and family conflict. The lack of legal recognition also means that women in polygamous marriages have limited recourse in the event of domestic violence or marital disputes, leaving them vulnerable to abuse.

Conflict Among Children: Children in polygamous families often experience competition and rivalry, particularly when it comes to their father's attention and financial resources. The father's time is typically divided among multiple households, which can lead to feelings of neglect and resentment among his children. This competition can also extend to issues of inheritance, as children from different mothers may feel that they are not receiving an equal share of their father's estate. Sibling rivalry is often exacerbated by the perception of favoritism, where one wife's children may be treated better or receive more resources than another wife's children. This rivalry can lead to long-term conflicts among siblings, affecting family cohesion and unity. In some cases, these disputes may persist into adulthood, leading to ongoing tension and estrangement among family members.

Cultural and Religious Tensions: In many contemporary societies, particularly those where Christianity is the dominant religion, polygamy is viewed as incompatible with religious teachings. The Christian faith generally promotes monogamy as the ideal form of marriage, emphasizing the unity of one man and one woman. As a result, polygamous families may face stigmatization and exclusion from religious communities, leading to social isolation. In Nigeria, for example, many Christian denominations actively discourage polygamy, and individuals in polygamous marriages may be denied full participation in church activities or leadership positions. This creates a tension between traditional cultural practices, which may accept or even encourage polygamy, and modern religious teachings, which condemn it. The result is often a feeling of alienation among polygamous families, who may struggle to reconcile their cultural heritage with their religious beliefs.

Inheritance and Succession Issues: One of the major challenges in polygamous families is the issue of inheritance and succession. When a man in a polygamous marriage dies, disputes often arise over how his property and wealth should be divided among his wives and children. In many cases, the absence of a clear will or legal framework for dividing assets can lead to protracted legal battles and family conflict. Inheritance disputes are particularly common in societies where customary law conflicts with formal legal systems. In some cultures, inheritance may be determined by traditional customs, which may not provide equal rights to all wives and children. This can lead to situations where some family members are disinherited or receive less than their fair share of the estate, resulting in long-lasting resentment and division within the family.

Impact on Child Development: Children raised in polygamous families often face unique developmental challenges, particularly when it comes to their emotional and psychological well-being. The divided attention of the father, combined with the tension and rivalry among co-wives, can create a stressful and unstable home environment. Children may feel neglected by their father, who is unable to provide the same level of care and guidance to all his offspring. This lack of emotional support can affect children's social and academic development, leading to behavioral problems and difficulties forming healthy relationships. The economic strain of polygamy may also limit children's access to education, healthcare, and other essential services, further hindering their development. In some cases, children from polygamous families may struggle to break free from the cycle of poverty and inequality, as their opportunities for personal and professional growth are limited.

Domestic Violence: Polygamous marriages are often associated with a higher risk of domestic violence, particularly due to the tensions and conflicts that arise between co-wives. Disputes over the husband's time, resources, and attention can lead to physical altercations, emotional abuse, and psychological manipulation. In some cases, co-wives may resort to violence against each other or their children, creating a dangerous and unstable home environment. Domestic violence in polygamous families is often exacerbated by the lack of legal protections for women in such marriages. In societies where polygamy is not recognized by law, women may have limited recourse in the event of abuse, as they are not afforded the same legal rights as women in monogamous marriages. This leaves many women in polygamous relationships vulnerable to ongoing violence and exploitation.

Conclusion

Polygamy in contemporary Nigeria presents numerous social, economic, and emotional challenges, particularly in light of the growing influence of Christian monogamous values. These challenges, including gender inequality, psychological stress, economic burdens, health risks, and legal issues, underscore the complex nature of polygamous relationships. Despite its deep cultural roots in certain parts of Nigeria, polygamy often conflicts with modern Christian teachings that emphasize monogamy and equality in marriage. As Nigeria continues to

modernize, the practice of polygamy faces increasing scrutiny, particularly from religious institutions that advocate for monogamy as the ideal form of marriage. The Christian response to polygamy, therefore, involves a call for gender equality, the promotion of family unity, and a focus on the emotional and psychological well-being of all family members. While cultural traditions should be respected, addressing the ills of polygamy requires a comprehensive approach that includes legal reforms, educational initiatives, and religious guidance.

Recommendations

1. Christian organizations should collaborate with educational institutions and the media to promote awareness of the ethical, social, and health-related challenges posed by polygamy. These campaigns should emphasize the Christian model of monogamous marriage, highlighting its benefits for family stability, gender equality, and the well-being of children.
2. Churches should provide comprehensive pre-marital and marital counseling programs that emphasize the values of monogamy, mutual respect, and equality. By equipping couples with the tools to build healthy marriages, the Christian community can help prevent the social and emotional issues often associated with polygamy.
3. Christian institutions should advocate for legal reforms that protect the rights of women in polygamous unions, especially in terms of inheritance, child custody, and marital rights. These reforms should seek to harmonize customary, civil, and religious laws to ensure justice for all parties involved, especially vulnerable women and children.
4. Christian leaders should engage in dialogue with traditional and community leaders who uphold polygamy. By fostering mutual respect and understanding, both parties can work together to address the challenges of polygamy, ensuring that cultural traditions evolve in ways that protect the dignity and rights of individuals.
5. Churches should establish support systems for women and children affected by polygamous marriages. These programs could include economic empowerment initiatives, psychological counseling, and legal assistance. By providing practical support, the Christian community can mitigate the negative effects of polygamy on women and children, promoting their welfare.
6. Christian organizations should work with policymakers to draft and implement policies that promote gender equality within marriage. This includes ensuring equal access to education and economic opportunities for women, which can empower them to make informed decisions about marriage and family life.
7. The Christian response to polygamy can benefit from dialogue between different denominations and faiths. By sharing perspectives and experiences, religious groups can collaborate on developing strategies to address polygamy in ways that respect both faith traditions and human rights.
8. Churches should reinforce the teaching of monogamous marriage as a biblical ideal. This includes providing theological education that stresses the importance of love, commitment, and mutual respect between spouses. Encouraging monogamy as the preferred form of marriage will help align contemporary Christian practice with scriptural teachings.

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