

RESEARCH REPORT

POLYGAMY MATTERS

Lived experiences of women in
polygamous families in North
London

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INTRODUCTION

This report is the outcome of a three-year collaboration with the Middle Eastern Women & Society Organisation (MEWSo), a women's rights group dedicated to supporting marginalised women. Made possible by a Big Lottery Fund grant, MEWSo delivered the first-ever tailored service in the UK for women in polygamous families. Between 2022 and 2024, we engaged deeply with women navigating the complexities of polygamy through storytelling workshops and semi-structured interviews.

The research captures the lived experiences of women, predominantly migrants from Middle Eastern and North African countries such as Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Morocco, where polygamy exists as a cultural and religious norm. Many participants recounted distressing scenarios, including abandonment by husbands, the emotional and financial burdens of single motherhood, and the societal stigma surrounding divorce.

The stories also reflect how traditional gendered expectations often leave women solely responsible for their children's welfare, sacrificing their personal needs to fulfill maternal roles.

Central to the findings is the profound and underexplored impact of polygamy on children's mental health. Women shared accounts of their children grappling with emotional loss, anger, and trauma—sometimes culminating in severe mental health conditions. These narratives underscore the interconnected struggles of mothers and their children, shaped by the pressures of polygamy.

By centering women's voices, this report highlights their resilience, agency, and struggles while offering insights into how policy and community responses can better support women and children in polygamous families.

PAST RESEARCH REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

This literature review aims to give an overview of how polygamous marriages in the UK are being treated in scholarly debates as well as pull together in one place different studies' recommendations for (policy) responses towards polygamous relationships in contemporary Britain. It also offers an overview of the legal situation with references for more detailed resources. In doing so, this review attempts to support individuals and community groups working with issues related to polygamous practices and raise awareness of the implications for society. After discussion of the current legal framework in English and international law, the review's sections each highlight different aspects of polygamous relationships. Together, they provide a comprehensive review of polygamy in the UK as lived experience, in public discourse and media representations, and its relation to women's agency and practices of young Muslims in Britain including online dating.

1. LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND POLYGAMY

In Europe, polygamy is often discussed in the context of Muslim immigration. Scholars have explored the challenges it poses to Western legal systems (Federico 2014; Naqvi 2017) and its impact on women, particularly in terms of financial and legal vulnerability (Shah 2003; Federico 2014). In North America, polygamy has been a significant issue among Mormon communities. Legal cases in the US and Canada have upheld the criminal prohibition of polygamy, with courts concluding that the practice is inherently harmful, especially for women. In the UK, polygamous marriages conducted domestically are not legally valid, as the law requires all UK marriages to be monogamous. However, polygamous marriages performed abroad may be recognized if the parties were domiciled in a country where polygamy is legal at the time of marriage. Unregistered religious marriages in the UK, including polygamous ones, are considered non-marriages and do not provide legal rights akin to those in registered marriages. There have been calls for all marriages in England and Wales to be registered to address this issue. In 2022, the Law Commission proposed a reform that would regulate officiants responsible for ceremonies, which would include penalties for misleading couples about the validity of their marriage.

LEGAL AND POLICY TIMELINE

Hyde v Hyde
1st court case involved an Englishman who converted to Mormonism, married a fellow Mormon in the US.

1866

Matrimonial Causes Act
Section 11(d) provides that a polygamous marriage entered into outside England & Wales after 1971 is void if either party to the marriage was, at the time, domiciled in England & Wales.

1973

Immigration Act
Immigration Act of 1988 prevents second wives from entering the UK if another wife has already been admitted

1988

1949

1979

Marriage Act
To be legally valid, all marriages in the UK must be monogamous and must be carried out in accordance with the requirements of the Marriage Act 1949 (as amended).

CEDAW
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women states polygamous marriages 'ought to be discouraged and prohibited'

Al-Mudaris v Al-Mudaris
A person does not commit bigamy where they contract an unregistered religious marriage in England, without disclosing the existence of a subsisting marriage.

1994

2001

State Pension
State Pension, applicable to people reaching retirement age after April 2016, does not recognize polygamous marriages for pension entitlements.

2013

2016

2022

Immigration regulations
Immigration restrictions were extended to the children of additional wives.

Universal Credit
Universal Credit no longer recognises additional partners in polygamous relationships for the purpose of welfare benefits

Law Commission
Weddings law reform recommendations: offence if officiant dishonestly misleads couple about effect of ceremony or not disclosing if it will not give rise to valid marriage.

Polygamy and International Human Rights

Polygamy has been identified as discriminatory against women in several United Nations human rights documents. The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) discourages polygamy due to its adverse effects on women and children. Although some international conventions allow for the non-recognition of polygamous marriages, there is no blanket prohibition. Critics argue that framing polygamy as harmful reflects Eurocentric and sometimes racist views, positioning Western monogamy as superior.

Legal Regulation of Polygamy in the UK

In the UK, bigamy, which includes polygamy, is a criminal offense. However, polygamous marriages conducted abroad may be recognized under certain conditions. English case law on polygamy primarily developed in response to immigration from countries where polygamy is legal, with key cases dating back to the 19th century (beginning with the case of *Hyde v Hyde* in 1866 involving an Englishman who converted to Mormonism and married a fellow Mormon in the US). Today, the UK recognizes some polygamous marriages if they were celebrated in countries where polygamy is lawful, provided the parties involved were not domiciled in the UK at the time. Immigration law plays a significant role in the regulation of polygamy in the UK. Since the 1980s, immigration controls have been used to restrict the entry of multiple spouses. For example, the Immigration Act of 1988 prevents second wives from entering the UK if another wife has already been admitted. These restrictions have raised concerns about discrimination, particularly regarding the rights of second wives and their children.

Welfare Benefits and Polygamy

UK welfare law allows for some benefits for polygamous families, although the introduction of Universal Credit has changed this. Under previous systems, a man and his first wife could claim benefits as a couple, while additional wives could receive a reduced amount. Universal Credit, however, does not recognize polygamous relationships for benefit purposes, which some argue further marginalizes vulnerable individuals within these marriages. Others argue that because additional spouses must claim benefits as single individuals, this could benefit some polygamous households receiving more under Universal Credit than they would have under the previous benefits system (Fairbairn et al. 2017; Fairbairn, Gower, Kennedy 2023). Vacchelli's research (2020) shows that civil society organizations often fill gaps in formal welfare provisions, offering tailored support that resonates with the lived experiences of the women involved.

Unrecognized marriages under UK law

Many Muslim marriages, whether polygamous or monogamous, are conducted only through religious ceremonies (*nikah*) and are not recognized under UK civil law. This lack of legal recognition leaves women without the same rights as those in civil marriages, particularly in cases of divorce or inheritance. Some women are unaware that their religious marriages are not recognized by the state, while others prefer religious marriages for personal or cultural reasons. However, this can lead to exploitation, with men deliberately misleading women about their marital rights. Women in polygamous marriages often face financial and emotional neglect, with some becoming single mothers reliant on welfare benefits. Studies show that these women experience higher rates of depression and other mental health issues, exacerbated by the emotional strain of polygamy.

Void Marriages vs. Non-Qualifying Ceremonies

A key distinction in English law is between "void marriages" and "non-qualifying ceremonies." A marriage in England and Wales involving individuals who are already in a legally recognized marriage is considered void. However, certain ceremonies, such as religious ceremonies (e.g. the Muslim *nikah*) that do not meet the 1949 Marriage Act's requirements, are seen as "non-qualifying." This classification has significant legal implications because void marriages can still lead to financial relief if the relationship ends, whereas non-qualifying ceremonies have no such legal recognition (Naqvi 2023). A more detailed review of literature dealing specifically with the legal situation of polygamy in the UK, can be found in the first report entitled "[Polygamy matters: creative workshops with women in polygamous relationships](#)"

2. PROBLEMATISATION AND STIGMATIZATION OF (TRANSNATIONAL) MUSLIM PRACTICES

The practice of polygamy among Muslims in the UK has been shaped by transnational migration. Migration can create new motivations for polygamy, such as separation from family or attempts to bypass immigration laws. Contemporary forms of polygamy practiced in Europe are not simply age-old traditions but are evolving in response to the conditions of migration. Some men use polygamy to marry a wife chosen for them by their family while also marrying a woman of their own choice. This often results in the abandonment of one of the wives.

Some scholars argue that polygamy is becoming more common in the UK, partly due to an Islamic revival and the mainstreaming of polygamy as part of an "Islamic way of life." The rise of online matchmaking platforms, such as SecondWife.com, has also facilitated the practice. The current political climate is one characterised by problematisation and securitisation of Muslim (legal) practices (Fekete 2006; Razack 2008; Eliassi 2013), as well as public scrutiny of gender relations in the field.

In this context, 'what emerges from the collision between government policy, the established conventions of media communication, and ideological pressures having their historical roots in Orientalism, is a consensus within which those perceived "negative", "threatening" features of Muslim belief and behaviour are constantly promoted and reinforced' (Morey and Yaqin 2010, p. 146).

Polygamy, in much of the existing literature, is investigated in connection with immigration, private international law, or questions of integration of migrants. The effect is that polygamy is strongly associated with transnational practices of British Muslims and continues to be associated with the orientalist idea of them not truly belonging to the British citizenry, as they continue to be viewed with suspicion and their 'loyalty' questioned (K. E. Brown 2010, p. 171). Against this background, initiatives like Baroness Cox's Equality Bill seek 'to frame a legislative response to such anxieties' (The Lord Bishop of Manchester 2012).

Navqvi's work also touches on the historical colonial and orientalist perspectives that have shaped how polygamy is viewed in Western contexts. Polygamy is often framed as a practice that must be rejected due to its supposed incompatibility with equality, without fully understanding the socio-cultural contexts in which it operates (Naqvi 2023). She emphasizes the importance of historical awareness in examining contemporary issues related to polygamy, specifically in English law. Historical consciousness reveals how colonialist attitudes continue to influence current legal frameworks. The colonial legacy is embedded in the regulation of polygamous marriages, and it frames these relationships in terms of backwardness and inferiority. The concept pushes the reader to critically assess how colonial narratives have shaped contemporary views on marital practices.

Through historical analysis, Naqvi (2023), demonstrates how English courts have consistently upheld Christian monogamy as the ideal structure for marriage. Polygamy is seen as a violation of this moral and legal standard, and overseas marriages that permit or practice polygamy are either dismissed or forcefully mutated into monogamous unions. This privileging of Christian values shapes the legal responses to foreign marriages, often diminishing the legal and personal agency of those in polygamous relationships.

What is more, Naqvi (2023) frames private international law not just as a conflict of legal systems but as a "conflict of cultures." Naqvi (2023) opens with a critique of Western resistance to polygamy, highlighting how contemporary Western societies continue to "other" polygamy by asserting it as something foreign and incompatible with Western norms. The author argues that the statement, "No thank you; we don't do that here," reveals an inherent denial of the presence of polygamy within the West, ignoring the diversity of practices within Western societies, such as Mormon polygamy in North America.

3. MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Polygamy, though not legally recognized in the UK, has occasionally surfaced in discussions of popular culture, particularly in relation to media representations and public debates about multiculturalism, religion, and social integration. The portrayal and discussion of polygamy in the UK often intersect with broader themes of immigration, religious practices, and legal pluralism.

Polygamy has occasionally been depicted in UK media, which plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions. Television documentaries, such as Channel 4's "The Men with Many Wives" (2014), explore the lives of British Muslim men engaged in polygamous marriages. These media portrayals often emphasize the tension between religious practices and British legal and social norms, contributing to the framing of polygamy as both a cultural practice and a social issue.

According to Yasmin Rehman (2013), media coverage of polygamy often highlights the negative aspects, such as exploitation and emotional harm to women, reinforcing the perception of polygamy as incompatible with British values. Rehman argues that such portrayals contribute to the stigmatization of Muslim communities and can lead to the marginalization of those involved in polygamous relationships.

Naqvi (2017) highlights how British media often portray polygamous marriages in a sensationalist manner, which can obscure the nuanced realities of those living in such relationships. Charsley and Liversage (2013) analyze how popular culture, through media representations, contributes to the construction of polygamy as a controversial and often misunderstood practice within the UK's multicultural landscape. The debates are also linked to broader discussions about legal pluralism and multiculturalism. Prakash Shah (2003) discusses how British law and media both frame polygamy as a challenge to the legal and moral fabric of society, often portraying it as a practice that is at odds with British norms of monogamy and gender equality.

While the image conveyed is often a one-dimensional view that fails to consider the diverse experiences and motivations of women involved in polygamy, media coverage and representation can also serve as a platform for raising awareness about the complexities of polygamy and potential negative impacts that might otherwise be ignored, such as the legal and social challenges faced by women in polygamous marriages, the lack of legal protection and maintenance rights, or the potential negative impact on children (Federico 2014).

4. MUSLIM WOMEN'S AGENCY

In connection with the Sharia debate in Ontario, Canada between 2003 and 2006, Korteweg (2017) observes that 'the idea of gender equality plays a particular role in the political marginalization of immigrant communities' (Korteweg 2017, p. 219). Concerns regarding gender justice and the domination of patriarchal structures in Muslim family traditions form a crucial element of much of the public and policy debate around Muslim law and Islam more broadly in Britain (Kundhani 2012). For example, in the debate sparked by the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams's speech in 2008 Bano (2008) observes that 'unsurprisingly, perhaps, tensions were expressed via a focus on the issue of gender and gender relations, and the "subordinating" effect that Islam has upon Muslim women. Western women were presented as "enlightened" and bearers of liberal legal ideals..., while the Muslim female subject was presented as the "other", a victim to cultural and religious practices' (Bano 2008, p. 285).

Shaista Gohir, chair of Muslim Women's Network UK, commented in relation to the government-led review of Sharia law and the Home Affairs Select Committee inquiry into Sharia councils in Britain that 'everyone wants to listen to 21 Muslim women when highlighting their terrible experiences. However when it comes to the solutions, everyone thinks they know what is best for them' (Bashir 2016).

A discourse that essentialises, stigmatises and securitises Muslims in Britain may create particular challenges for Muslim women who are disadvantaged because of a subordinate position in gender relations. In their intersection, these two dynamics highlight the gendered victimisation of women who are thus subject to dual (or multiple) discrimination as women (called victims) and Muslims within a discourse of securitisation (for a similar point see Mookherjee 2009, p. 157).

Brown (2008) argues that the gendered impact of the securitisation of Muslims has not attracted much attention in policy and research (Brown 2008, p. 472). An uncritical and simplistic framing of public campaigns around combatting injustices on behalf of Muslim women therefore not only furthers a gendered orientalism, it also perpetuates a patriarchal discourse that renders women in general as 'vulnerable' and in need of protection.

Naqvi (2023) aims to challenge the simplistic association between polygamy and harm, advocating for a more contextualized understanding that takes into account broader power structures and the diverse experiences of women. The author complicates the view that polygamy inherently causes inequality, suggesting that patriarchy and broader societal power structures are the root causes of harm, rather than polygamy itself. Naqvi offers a nuanced understanding of experiences of women in polygamy. She emphasizes that not all women in polygamous marriages see themselves as victims. It highlights how some women exercise agency and find empowerment, even within relationships that are commonly portrayed as harmful. Naqvi (2023) also critiques the humanitarian rationale used by the courts, particularly the colonial-era notion that polygamous wives need to be "saved" from their marriages. This perspective reinforces stereotypes about non-Western women as passive victims in need of protection, undermining their agency.

While much of the discussion focuses on the negative effects of non-legal recognition, Naqvi (2023) acknowledges that non-legally binding marriages can offer women agency, negotiating their own terms within their religious marriages, using their faith and cultural context to assert their rights. This perspective challenges the dominant narrative that portrays women in non-legally recognized marriages solely as victims and understands them as a form of resistance to state-imposed norms.

In the context of Muslim polygamy, Naqvi's study based on qualitative interviews with women provides insights into women's empowerment and its limitations. Women in the study (2023) attempt to use religious teachings to gain rights and respect within their relationships, but cultural stigma and societal expectations often limit their success. Naqvi suggests that cultural norms are more "man-made" and may need to be revisited to align more closely with religious ideals that promote fairness and equity.

Vacchelli et al.'s research on polygamy based on participatory arts methods (2020) paints a somewhat different picture. The research notes that some women enter polygamous marriages due to limited options, especially for those considered to have "diminished value in the marriage market," such as single mothers, widows, or women over 30. This points to an intersection of cultural norms, gender expectations, and economic factors in driving these practices.... In the same paper, the findings from the World Café discussions suggest that while polygamy can limit women's agency, especially when driven by religious beliefs or cultural pressures, there is a need for legal frameworks that protect women's rights in such marriages. This includes the necessity for consent, legal recognition, and protection against potential harm.

² Primary data in this report shows that women negotiate their experiences in polygamy on their own terms, countering the traditional view that polygamy solely victimizes women, for instance by initiating divorce.

5. YOUNG MUSLIM LIVES IN CONTEMPORARY BRITAIN: ONLINE DATING, YOUTH PRACTICES, GENDERED POWER RELATIONS

Recent research on online dating in Muslim communities, particularly among young generations, reveals a nuanced approach to integrating modern matchmaking with Islamic values. A 2020 study titled "The Relationship between Online Dating and Islamic Identity among British Muslims" found that online dating has become a mainstream option for young Muslims in Western societies like the UK. The research highlights that many British Muslims are using online platforms to navigate the challenges of finding a marriage partner, while still maintaining a connection to their Islamic identity (de Rooij, 2020).³ This adaptation allows for a balance between religious obligations and the freedom of choosing a partner in an environment where family matchmaking is traditionally emphasized. Furthermore, discussions around polygamous relationships in these platforms are becoming more common as online spaces provide a broader context for exploring such options within Islamic guidelines. The study of "Exploring Online Infaq Intentions of Young Muslims" focuses on the younger generation's interaction with online platforms for financial contributions but hints at a broader digital engagement, suggesting that this generation is increasingly comfortable using technology for religiously aligned practices, including dating (Ikawati et al., 2024). The studies underscore the growing significance of online matchmaking as a way to modernize traditional practices while respecting Islamic values.

De Rooji (2020) challenges the binary view that conservative Muslims reject online dating while progressive Muslims embrace it. Instead, this study finds that even devout Muslims use these platforms to seek partners who share their values. Some apps, like Muzmatch, include options that align with traditional Islamic practices, such as filtering potential partners by their religious adherence and practices. This fluidity shows that Muslim identities are not fixed but instead are negotiated within the context of their environment and technological tools. Traditional matchmaking in Muslim communities often involves family or community intermediaries. However, in Western contexts, fewer Muslims share the same religious beliefs, making family-mediated matchmaking more difficult. Online dating provides a solution by offering a more individualized approach, where participants can seek partners who align with their specific religious beliefs and cultural values. The paper emphasizes that the use of dating apps among British Muslims does not necessarily reflect a progressive versus conservative divide. Instead, it shows the fluid nature of Islamic identity, where participants may hold conservative views on aspects of life (e.g., seeking a partner who prays regularly) while using modern technology to find a match. The interaction between traditional values and modern technology complicates the narrative of conservatism and progressivism.

³ Interestingly, the paper also introduces the concept of Muslim dating apps as a 'third space,' where British Muslims can express their identities, negotiate cultural values, and seek partners outside of familial and community constraints. This 'third space' allows for blending traditional values with contemporary means of interaction.

Ali et al (2020) discuss the concept of agency in *halal* dating. The study employs a nuanced definition of 'agency,' building on Saba Mahmood's idea of "capacity for action." Agency here is understood not as rebellion against religious norms, but as a way of navigating within those norms to make choices about one's life. It is observed that young Muslims in the UK express agency by differentiating between permissible forms of dating, seeking ways to make decisions that align with both their faith and their personal desires. The concept of '*halal* dating' serves as a means for these individuals to explore relationships without necessarily rejecting their cultural and religious values. This stands in contrast to the stereotype that Muslim relationships are strictly controlled by family and community, devoid of personal choice or love. The research points out that *halal* dating is deeply gendered, with women facing more scrutiny and pressure to adhere to traditional expectations than men. Female participants often feel the need to justify their relationship choices to family and community, while male participants experience comparatively more freedom.

The literature on polygamy in the UK is divided between critiques of the Eurocentric bias in legal and public discourses on polygamy and concerns about the harms the practice inflicts on women and children. In examining polygamous marriages in the UK, recurring themes emphasize the complexity of this practice in legal, cultural, and socio-political contexts. The literature reveals that polygamy intersects with issues of gender justice and migration, often shaped by historical and colonial narratives. Legal frameworks in the UK and international human rights law view polygamy as discriminatory, yet the practice persists, influenced by cultural and religious dynamics. Key challenges include the lack of legal recognition of unregistered religious marriages, leaving women vulnerable to financial and emotional neglect.

Media portrayals often sensationalize polygamy, reinforcing stereotypes about Muslim communities, while nuanced research highlights diverse experiences, including possible women's agency within these marriages. Policy recommendations are wide-ranging and include different approaches from compulsory marriage registration to culturally sensitive legal reforms, or informal tolerance of the practice. Importantly though, many scholars advocate for participatory approaches centering women's voices, emphasizing the need to address structural inequities and to better understand and acknowledge diverse lived realities. There are difficulties in capturing the lived realities of polygamous marriages, particularly due to the stigma, secrecy, and personal nature of the practice. Naqvi (2023) points out the limitations of their study, including the challenges in finding women openly living in polygamous marriages and the lack of male perspectives. This recognition underscores the importance of more extensive, nuanced research that accurately reflects the diverse experiences of individuals in polygamous relationships.

6. POLICY RESPONSES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Literature dealing with polygamy in the UK discusses different approaches and policy responses, with recommendations ranging from formal recognition to over-regulation or informal acceptance. An overview of the different approaches is illustrated below. What is central to most publications, is the call for more and more nuanced research that provides evidence on women's lived experience of polygamy in contemporary Britain that centres on women's voices and takes the wider socio-cultural context into account (Naqvi 2023, Vacchelli et al 2020, Dustin and Phillips 2008, Bowen 2010).

While some scholars advocate for wider legal recognition of polygamous marriages to protect women's rights, others argue for the compulsory registration of all religious marriages. This would limit polygamy and prevent the exploitation of women in unregistered marriages. Legal recognition is often seen as essential for social justice, offering individuals rights and a public status. However, Naqvi (2023) challenges the assumption that legal recognition is inherently beneficial, arguing that it can also bring additional consequences, such as reinforcing negative stereotypes and assimilation pressures. The author calls for a critical examination of what "recognition" entails and whether it genuinely serves the needs of women in polygamous marriages. Instead, Naqvi (2023) advocates for a "disruptive politics of recognition", which involves creating a "third space" that allows women to negotiate their identities outside of the state's regulatory framework, thereby disrupting the colonial-linked power dynamics in marriage law.

The UK government has implemented various policy responses to address the issue of polygamy, particularly through legal enforcement and social policy initiatives. However, there is an ongoing debate about the effectiveness of these measures and the need for further reforms. Dustin and Phillips (2008) critique the government's approach to polygamy, arguing that it is often reactive and focused on criminalization rather than addressing the root causes of the practice. They advocate for a more proactive approach that includes education, community engagement, and support services for women in polygamous marriages. Their work emphasizes the importance of understanding polygamy within the broader context of gender equality and social justice. Bowen (2010) discusses the role of community organizations in addressing the issue of polygamy, particularly within Muslim communities and highlights the importance of culturally sensitive interventions that respect religious beliefs while promoting gender equality and legal rights. He calls for greater collaboration between government agencies, community organizations, and religious leaders to develop effective strategies for addressing polygamy.

The discourse on polygamy in the UK reflects also an interaction between media representations, legal structures, and the lived realities of those involved, underscoring the importance of culturally sensitive approaches. Grillo (2015) critiques the media's tendency to sensationalize polygamy, focusing on extreme cases that reinforce stereotypes about Muslim communities. This coverage, Grillo argues, perpetuates stigma and obstructs nuanced discussions, which are crucial for addressing the complexities of polygamous relationships in constructive ways. Complementing this perspective, Abbas (2011) examines how the legal status of polygamous unions impacts children's access to education, healthcare, and social services. He advocates for policies that prioritize the welfare of children in these families, irrespective of their parents' marital circumstances.

The need for legal reform is a recurring theme across these analyses. Shah-Kazemi (2001) calls for a more inclusive legal framework that recognizes polygamous marriages in specific contexts, thereby aligning the UK's legal system with its human rights commitments and a respect for cultural diversity. Similarly, Naqvi (2023) highlights the urgency of reform but emphasizes the importance of grounding legal changes in the lived experiences of women in polygamous unions. Naqvi warns against the uncritical adoption of state recognition, arguing that reforms must dismantle colonial and patriarchal structures embedded in current legal paradigms.

Adding to this dialogue, Vacchelli et al. (2020) advocate for participatory research approaches that place women's voices at the center of the discussion. Using art-based methodologies, Vacchelli et al. in the previous report based on the pilot study with MEWSO capture the diverse experiences of women in polygamous relationships, revealing vulnerabilities and highlighting the need for both legal protection and community-driven support mechanisms. This work emphasizes that addressing polygamy-related issues requires not only legal changes but also culturally sensitive community engagement and support mechanisms that reflect the diverse experiences of women involved.

POSSIBLE POLICY RESPONSES

Based on the review of past research



REGULATION

Legal regulation of polygamy in English law. Focus on criminalization, however, may drive the practice underground.

ABROAD VALID

Keep partial recognition of polygamous marriages celebrated abroad.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Collaboration between government agencies, community organizations, religious leaders addressing gender equality and social justice in a culturally sensitive way.

RECOGNITION

Wider legal recognition of polygamous marriages to protect women's and children's rights and welfare, offering public status.

REGISTRATION

Compulsory registration of all religious marriages to limit polygamy and prevent the exploitation of women in unregistered marriages.

INFORMAL ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance of 'informal' polygamous marriages within the UK as 'third space' outside the state's regulatory framework.

METHODOLOGY

This report is based on a three year long engagement with the women's rights organisation MEWSO (Middle Eastern Women & Society Organisation). Thanks to a National Lottery fund obtained by MEWSO to deliver the first ever service in the UK specifically designed to support women in polygamous families, we have carried out a series of storytelling workshops (12 in total) and semi-structured interviews with women in polygamous families who have used MEWSO's services during this time (2022-2024).



12

Story telling workshops

20

Semi-structured interviews

Drawing on a pilot study which involved a number of MEWSO's service users in creative and participatory work (Vacchelli et al. 2020), for this report we used storytelling- based approaches to understand the lived experience of women who were involved in polygamy either as first wives or as second wives. Some of these -predominantly migrant- women come from countries where polygamy is a reality and normatively accepted independently from specific legislations in countries or origin- including north African countries such as Morocco, Libya, Tunisia, and Middle Eastern countries such as Iran, Iraq , Kurdistan, Syria. In line with the pilot report produced in 2020 a combination of qualitative and quantitative data were collected. From a qualitative perspective, data was collected in the course of 12 workshops designed to elicit personal stories in a safe space, using a range of techniques such as body mapping storytelling and other art-based strategies, and a series of semi-structured interviews. As in 2021 Covid restrictions were still in place, at this time we had to reduce the frequency of our workshops. Some interviews took place on-line with the majority of interviews taking place in person. The quantitative element of this report consists of a survey designed and administered by Aman Zanoon and the findings of the survey are presented in this report.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 women who have experienced polygamous marriages and whose children's mental health has often suffered the consequences of their father's abandonment. Because the women we spoke to were already accessing a service designed to help them cope with the negative consequences of polygamy, in some cases entailing domestic violence, we did not come across cases where polygamy was effectively negotiated by all parties involved. The most common scenarios we were faced with during this time is first wives having to face their husband marrying somebody else, often a member of the same community known to them, at times even a friend of the family, without asking consent to the first wife.

Another common scenario is women marrying a man to then discover that he already had a family without them knowing. Most of these marriages were arranged by families or were undertaken as migration strategies where one member of the marriage was a British citizen. Some of these marriages were regularly registered civil marriages, while some others were only religious marriages that left the women with no protection in the face of the break of the marriage, having to obtain a divorce in Sharia courts and faced with the heavy stigma of being a divorced women, often with children to care for. This situation in most of the cases made it difficult for these women to find another husband, especially as caring for young children was paramount in their new lives as single mothers having to deal with their own trauma and their children's.

At the end of this report we are offering insights from three expert interviews- Yasmin Rehman, Aina Khan and Halaleh Taheri. Halaleh Taheri is the founder and CEO of MEWSo, the organisation which provided the first service designed to help women in polygamous situations thanks to a Big Lottery/Connected Community fund. MEWSo made this study possible by organising the workshops and the interviews for this research.

In addition to storytelling strategies used to share lived experience of workshop participants and the interviews, we have also designed a survey which was distributed by a range of women's rights organisations to women in polygamous families in the London area. The questionnaire was designed and distributed by MEWSo staff via Google Forms. It was specifically shared with women who approached MEWSo for inquiries about polygamy. The survey was conducted primarily over the phone, where participants were guided through the questions and assisted in submitting their responses. To ensure accessibility, the questionnaire was available in Arabic and English. Women who were unable to complete the form independently were supported by a staff member or volunteer. Throughout the process, anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained to protect participants' privacy and ensure a safe data collection environment.

The link to the survey questions can be seen here:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1TXBO7LbCsgoE-_Xwv4fbX28-XSQEh-xFMfXDSIzzz0Y/edit

The report will first present the results of the survey and secondly will present a thematic analysis of the workshop and interviews.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

SURVEY

The survey was collaboratively designed by MEWSO and University of Greenwich and aimed to capture additional experiences of women in polygamous families. The data was collected between August 2021 and June 2023 and obtained 38 responses in total. Approximately 50% of respondents were over 45 years of age, about 30% between 30 and 45, 20% were between 20 and 30 and the remaining respondents were between 18 and 24. The different ethnicities of the respondents can be visualised here:

What is your ethnicity?

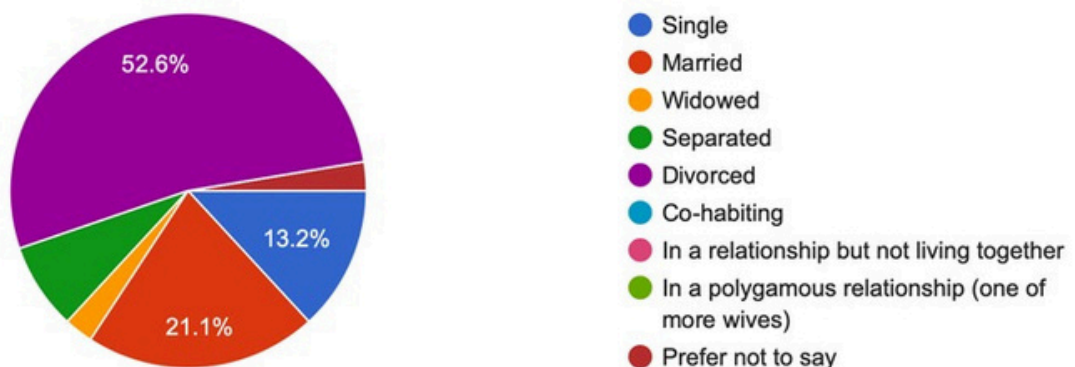
38 responses



With about 76% of the survey respondents from the Middle East, the almost entirety of the sample (97,4%) was of Muslim religion, while the reminders were Hindu. Interestingly, most of the respondents are divorced, 21,1% still married or co-habiting (13,2%). Other statuses can be visualised below:

What is your marital status?

38 responses



Education levels vary across the sample, with about 1/3 having achieved college or university-level education.

Level of Education?

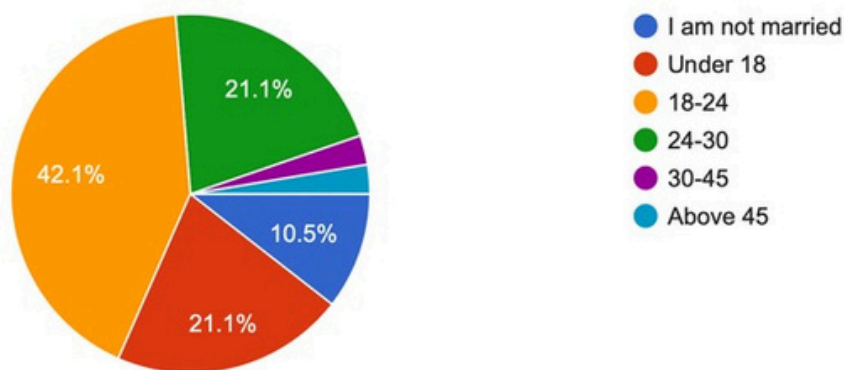
38 responses



To complement our data on education, the majority of the women taking part in the survey had an intermediate or advanced level of English (about 75%). Most of the women married at a young age, i.e. under 24, with 21% marrying under-age as evident by the chart below:

If you are married, how old were you when you got married?

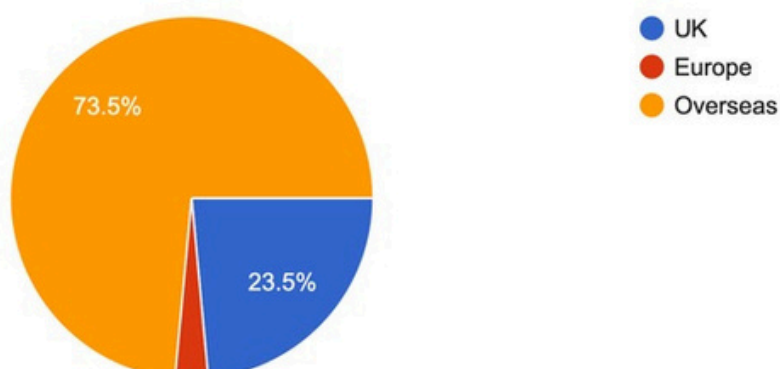
38 responses



To complement our data on education, the majority of the women taking part in the survey had an intermediate or advanced level of English (about 75%). Most of the women married at a young age, i.e. under 24, with 21% marrying under-age as evident by the chart below:

Where was your marriage held?

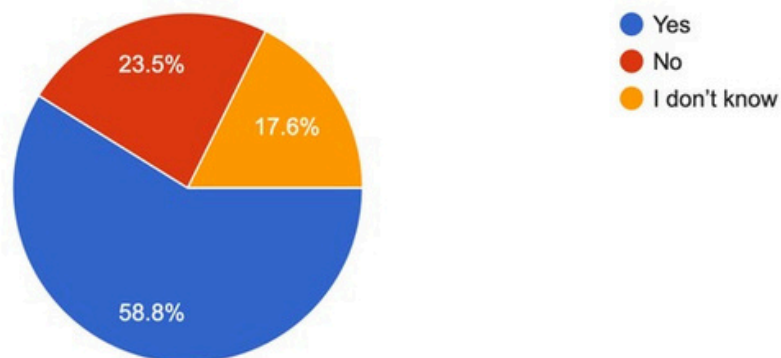
34 responses



With the majority of marriages held overseas, most people made sure their marriages were registered in the UK. This data resonates with Charsley and Liversage's research on polygamy as a migration strategy (Charsley and Liversage 2013). However it is evident from this survey that a concerning number either did not register their marriage or they were not aware whether their marriage was registered or not:

Is your marriage registered in the UK?

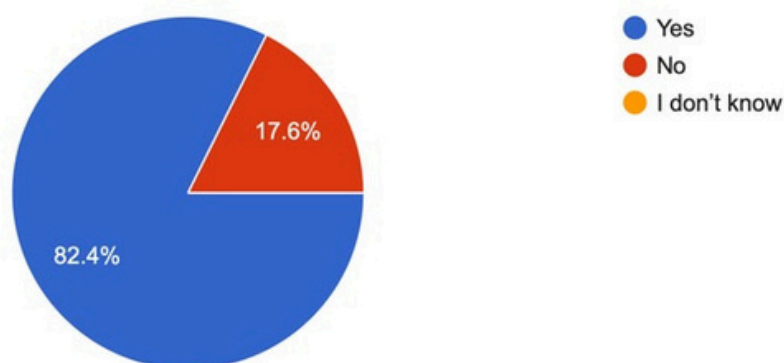
34 responses



Despite responding that their marriages were indeed registered in the UK (approximately 60%) the vast majority of the respondents reported that their marriages were registered overseas too. The UK may recognise a marriage conducted abroad if it complies with the laws of that country, both parties meet UK legal requirements, and it does not conflict with UK public policy. Regarding this question, some women were unaware of whether their marriage was registered in the UK. Those whose marriage was not registered in the UK were asked to clarify whether their marriage was officially registered in their country of origin and recognised by the UK, or if it remained unregistered in both their home country and the UK.

Is your marriage registered overseas/ your original country?

34 responses

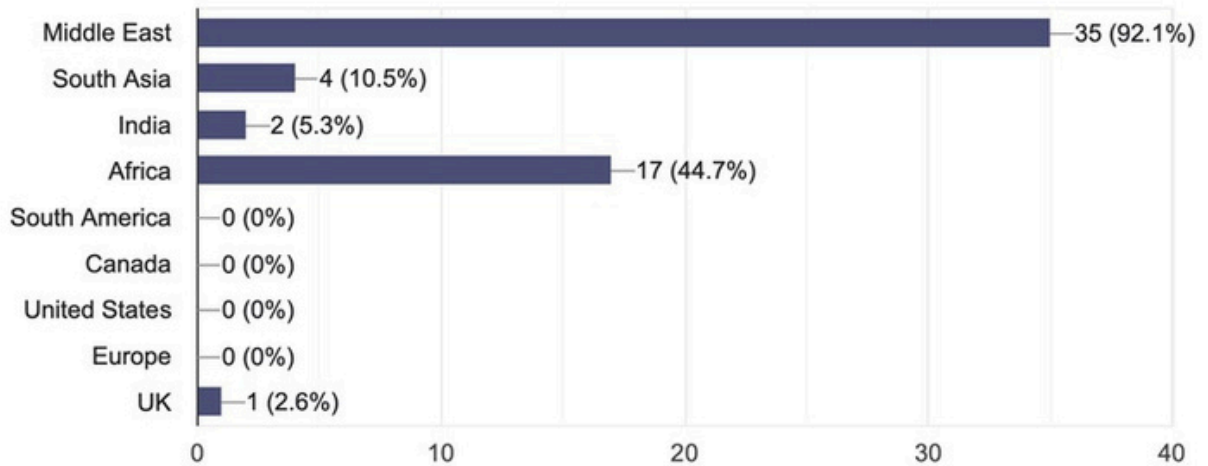


When asked "What is your understanding of polygamy, all women shared a basic understanding of what polygamy is, which they expressed in their own words, agreeing that polygamy is indeed sanctioned by Islamic religion and is about a man marrying more than one wife.

Respondents were subsequently asked where they think polygamy is most common as shown in the chart below:

Where do you think polygamy is most common? (You can choose more than one answer)

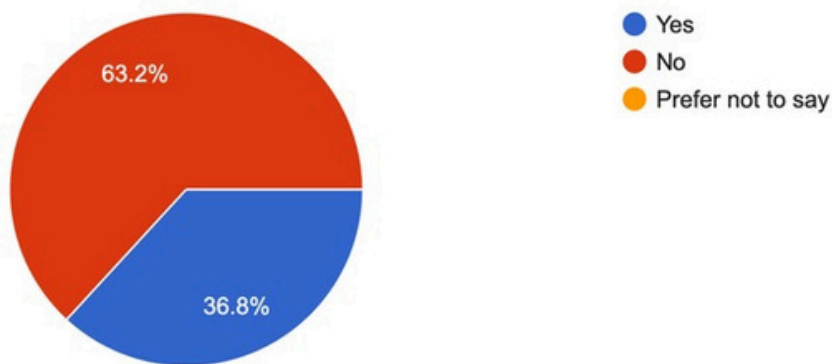
38 responses



When asked if they grew up in polygamous families, 73.7% respondents did not grow up in a polygamous family (their parents) and most of them (81.6%) knows someone who is in a polygamous family, however only about half of these families are based in the UK, and half abroad. 36% of the respondents stated they are or have been in a polygamous family themselves with the majority having a husband who has one additional wife, while in a minority of cases their husband had two additional wives.

Are you/were you in a polygamous relationship?

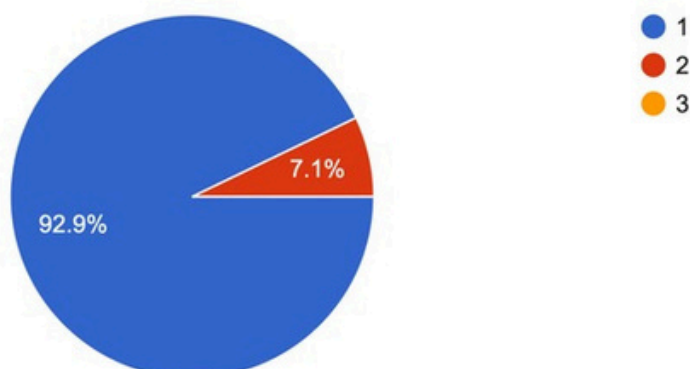
38 responses



Women who answered yes to the question above went on to answer the following questions:

How many other wives does/did your partner have (apart from you)?

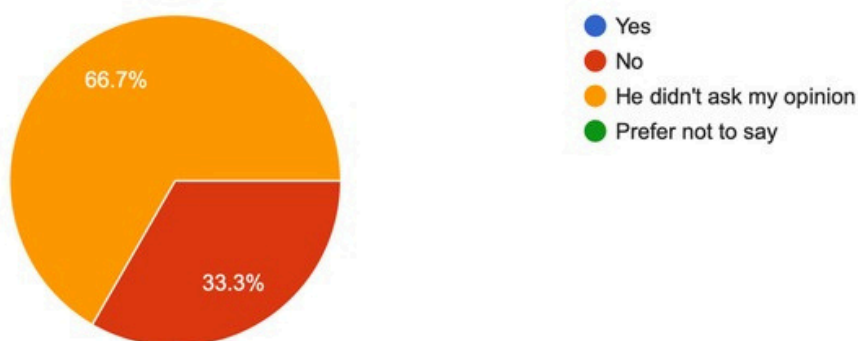
14 responses



The responses in the chart below indicate that most women were first wives- presumably because the survey were circulated amongst service users and women seeking help were the ones who felt they needed material or mental health support as first wives. When it comes to second wives, a minority of women, as we also could see from the workshops and interviews, were not aware that their husbands already had another family when they married. The survey confirms that some women (7%) did not know their husband was already married with the majority confirming they were the first wives. When it comes to the crucial question as to whether consent was asked before marrying an additional wife, most of them said there were not even asked for consent, while about 1/3 of the woman said they did not consent.

Did you agree/accept to be in polygamous relationship when your husband asked for you consent?

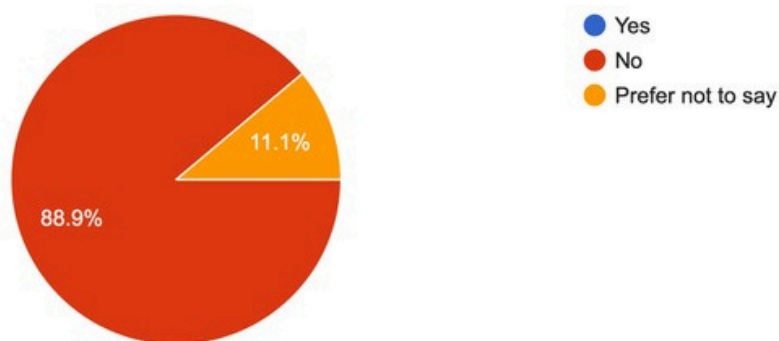
12 responses



The next question is particularly telling as it has open questions where the women could, if they wanted, explain why they answered the question the way they did. Most of the women said they would not accept to marry if they knew their husband was already married at the time of proposing- the reasons added below reveal the extent to which polygamy is a contested terrain even within Islamic culture and religion.

If you knew that your partner was married before you married him, would you still accept to marry him and be in a polygamous relationship?

9 responses



Can you explain why not?

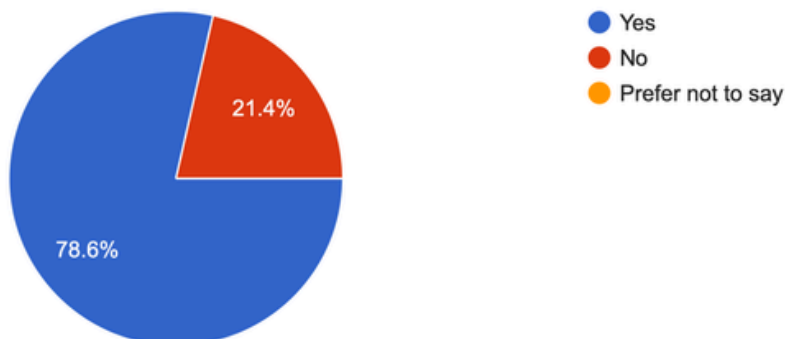
8 responses

- I don't want other women to feel the way I felt
- It breaks the women heart when her husband marry another women on her
- It is not fair on the wife and baby
- The man will not treat his wife's equally include emotional and financial
- I will no be comfortable I will not be happy
- I don't want any wife to feel how i felt
- It is the hardest thing in the world
- because It breaks the women, and i don't want her to feel how she make me feel

Aligning with these answer, several women in the workshops and interviews had already divorced their husbands at the time of engaging in this research and could speak about distressing experiences once they had managed to ask for support and engage in healing activities through MEWSO's services, ranging from one-to-one support to group activities. None of the women said they are happy in a polygamous family (100% responses) and the question about sharing confirms a certain amount of shame and non- disclosure in communicating being part of a polygamous family to others.

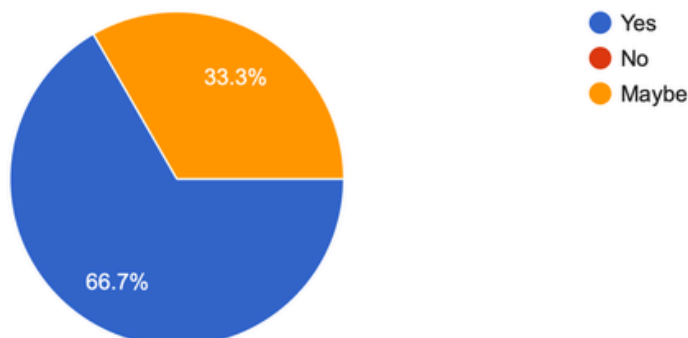
Have you ever shared with anyone that you are in polygamous relationship?

14 responses



Are you ashamed of saying that you are in a polygamous relationship?

3 responses



Feelings of shame are explained by the women themselves as follows, in their own words:

Can you explain why you are ashamed of saying that you are in a polygamous relationship?

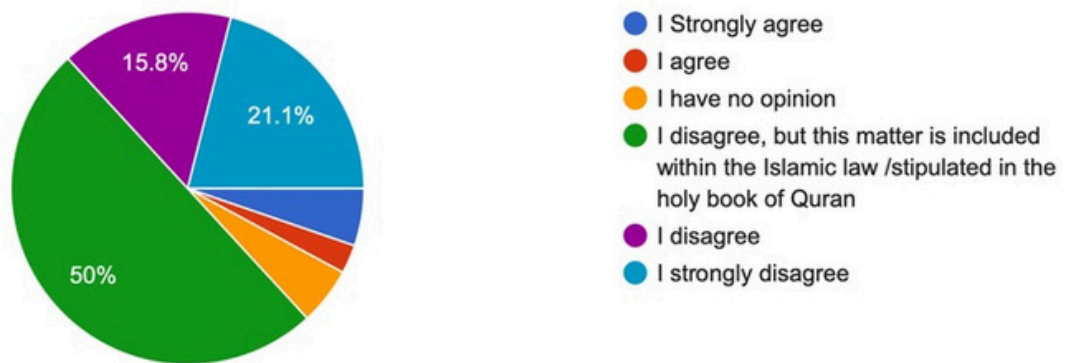
3 responses

- im scared
- It make me feel less than other wife.
- is is not a good feeling

Other responses that are confirmed in the context of what women shared in workshops and interviews reveal ambiguity with regards to the extent to which women effectively agree with the religious norm of polygamy. As much as 50% of the women disagree but feel they have to accept polygamy in order to be a good Muslim.

Do you agree with polygamous marriages?

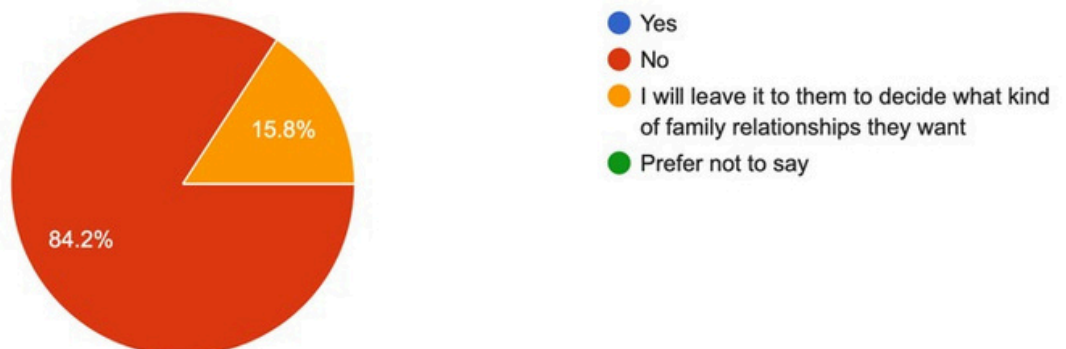
38 responses



The majority however does not wish polygamy to their children as evident from this chart:

Do you wish for your children to be in a polygamous relationship?

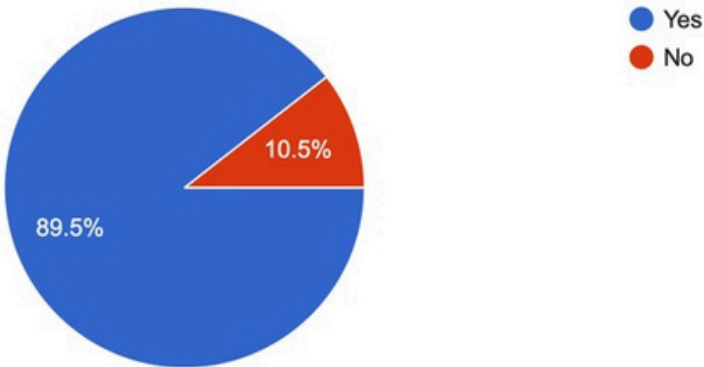
38 responses



With regards to awareness of the legal circumstances of polygamy, most respondents are aware polygamy is illegal in the UK, but some are not. Some are not aware polygamy is common practice in the UK despite it not being legal.

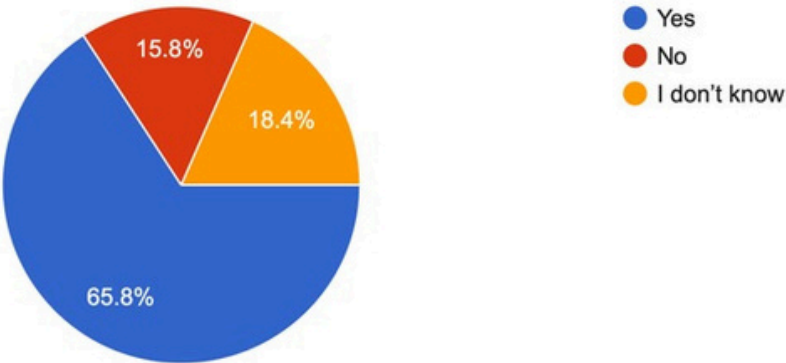
Do you know that polygamy is illegal in the UK?

38 responses



Did you know that polygamy is a common practice in certain communities in the UK, even though it's illegal?

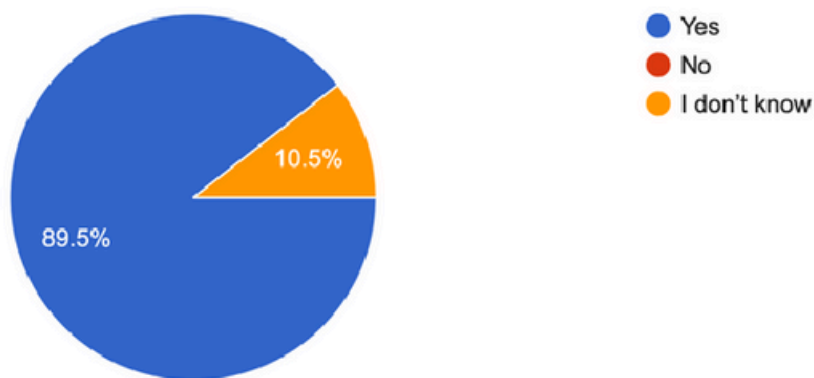
38 responses



Towards the conclusion of the survey, respondents were asked about the perceived impact of polygamy on children, something which has been under-explored in academic literature to date. Most women concur that polygamy has indeed a negative effect on children, as per the chart below and provide explanations in the open answers that follows. These open answers greatly resonate with what the women have disclosed in the context of workshops and interviews, highlighting the interconnection that exists between the mental health of mothers with that of the children, especially when mothers are the sole carer following the husband leaving the family to re-marry.

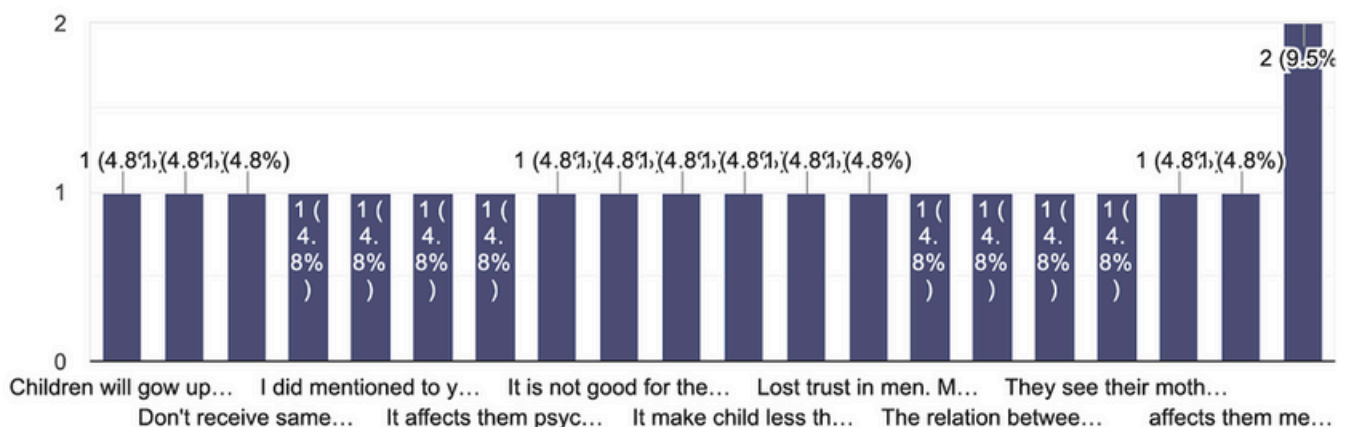
Do you believe that polygamy has a negative impact on women children?

38 responses



If so, could you please provide some examples of negative impact on children that polygamous relationships might have?

21 responses



With regards to awareness of the legal circumstances of polygamy, most respondents are aware polygamy is illegal in the UK, but some are not. Some are not aware polygamy is common practice in the UK despite it not being legal.

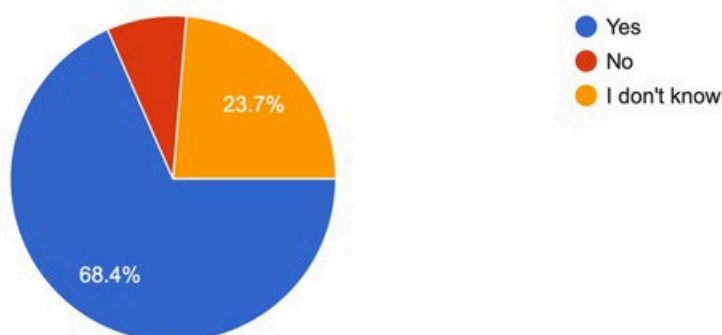
Would you like to provide some examples of negative impact that polygamous relationship might have on women and the rest of adults' family members? (21 responses)

- My son has mental health problem. I lost trust in men
- I become depressed and my son became more angry
- Deprive from her husband and more responsibility
- Women needs her husband besides her all the time
- affect her mentally and emotionally
- It breaks their heart
- In my opinion, I believe that would be a negative impact on the women mental health & quality of life
- mental health
- It make her so weak and so hard to r=handle the baby alone
- She would be affected
- It affect her in many ways
- Stress. Bad feeling I, because her husband doesn't her or her children
- The woman will be depressed
- Emotionally. Fight DV
- A lot of the responsibility will be on the mom alone
- It affects her psychologically and socially
- hard in everything
- It affects her mentally and put a lot of responsibility on her shoulder.
- They will feel bad . Too much stress. Mental health
- The husband behavior is not equally
- more problems in the family

Following these responses, the women were asked if the impact is negative on families too, and they broadly agree it is. Interestingly, when the last question asks whether the respondents would like to abolish polygamy, more than ¼ of the respondents said they either don't know or that they don't want to abolish it, confirming again the ambiguity and conflict existing within Islam where on the one had, respondents state they are not happy in polygamous families yet they feel that, in order to be a good Muslim, they need to go along with it and hence go for the 'I don't know' option when asked whether they wish for polygamy to stop. As evident from the chat below, most of the women who took part in the survey wish for the practice of polygamy to stop (68,4%).

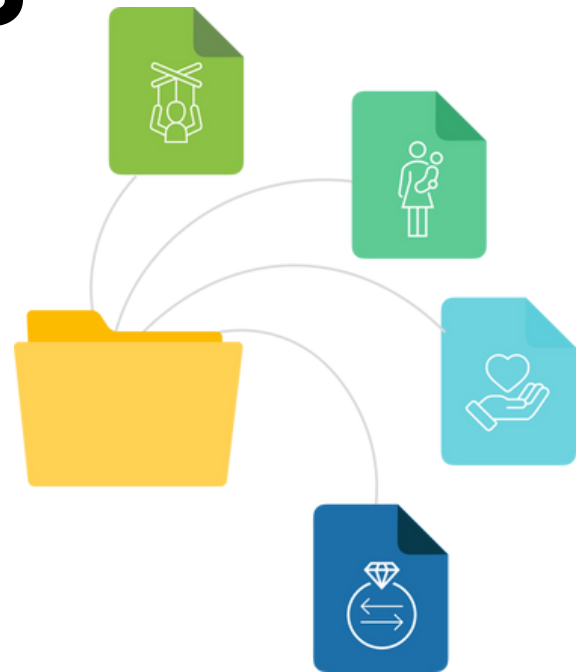
Do you wish for the practice of polygamy to stop?

38 responses



THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEWS & WORKSHOPS

All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the research participants/service users.



◆ Impact on children's mental health

An underexplored theme in polygamy research is its impact on children's mental health. Interviews revealed that absent fathers and struggling mothers often left children coping with emotional loss, depression, and anger, sometimes resulting in severe mental health issues or physical illness requiring hospitalization. This highlights the profound effects on children's well-being.

◆ Traditional gendered expectations in polygamous families

Polygamy reinforces traditional gender roles, with women often left as sole caregivers when husbands move on. Single mothers prioritized their children's welfare over personal lives, sacrificing opportunities to remarry or start new families. Women expressed that motherhood required such sacrifices, reflecting deeply ingrained cultural expectations and their lived experiences.

◆ Negotiating polygamy and religion

Women in polygamous relationships often struggle with balancing religious devotion and personal feelings. While accepting polygamy affirms their faith, many feel shame and avoid disclosing it within their community. Most participants reported negative experiences, also involving domestic violence, leading many to divorce husbands who started new families.

◆ Contested marriage practices

This theme speaks to the circumstances of many polygamous families where consent, the concept of marriage based on romantic love, age, migration, expression of religious identity through wedding rituals instead of civil marriages represent a contested terrain in the way societal and religious norms are negotiated.

THEME 1: IMPACT OF POLYGAMOUS MARRIAGES ON CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH

A theme that has not been sufficiently explored in the academic literature on polygamy is the impact polygamy has on children's mental health. This resulted very clearly from what was shared by research participants in the interviews and workshops. A common scenario emerging was that children either grew up without a father in the cases when a first wife was left when pregnant for instance of their second child, or alternatively men just left the family becoming unavailable for their children. Children were often left with having to cope emotionally with their own loss and with the depression and coping mechanisms of their mother, often developing mental health problems and anger, leading in some cases to physical disease or severe mental health conditions requiring hospitalisation.

Aisha was left to deal with her teenage children's sense of helplessness and anger following their father's decision to marry a much younger woman, leaving the mother feeling betrayed and willing to obtain a divorce following this decision. One of the children experienced mental health problems leading him to hospitalisation. The negative effects of polygamy on children is documented in a range of studies summarised in a comprehensive review by Al-Sharfi, Pfeffer, and Miller (2016).

"My first child developed mental health problems during the divorce as he loves his father too much and became bipolar. Because of his anger he was taking it out on me, breaks things in the house."

AISHA

Laila recounts an even more extreme experience during one of the workshops. Without wanting to expand or describe the details of her loss, she disclosed that she lost her daughter to mental health following the breaking up of her parents caused by her father's sense of entitlement in marrying a second wife and subsequently disappearing from the household. Like Leila, several women throughout the workshops and the interviews shared that their children had been negatively impacted by the breaking up of their family, in most cases the loss of their fathers and the consequences the break up had on their mother's mental health.

"I lost my daughter to mental health problems"

LAILA

THEME 2: TRADITIONAL GENDERED EXPECTATIONS IN POLYGAMOUS FAMILIES

Polygamy broadly reflects traditional gendered expectations which are articulated by the participants in several ways. During the interviews and the workshops it often emerged that it was the women who were left caring for the children following the assumption that it is a woman's responsibility to do so. When the husband moved on to a new family, because of their role as single mothers looking after the children the women had to prioritise the welfare of the children until they were adults, in this way missing the opportunity to meet somebody else and then too creating a new family. Women often shared the idea that it is a mother's role to sacrifice their life for the children and this is what they did in practice when faced with the separation.

Through polygamy moreover the Islamic religion legitimises the common belief across most cultures that there are different standards when assessing practices polygyny and polyandry, whereas polygyny is seen in the public imaginary as something which is normalised or even reinforcing one's masculinity, while polyandry is seldom practiced in some cultures with the sole aim of preserving property rights.

“He wanted to be with both wives but he was not able to support both families and children if it wasn't for the benefit he's getting from the council”

ZAHRA

In this sense, the Islamic religion by allowing polygamy, according to some but not all interpretations of the sacred book Quran, is reinforcing these asymmetric ways to understand sexual and behavioural gendered expectations and how they sit within masculinity and femininity. It is important to highlight that the way polygamy is practiced in the communities we came across in this study, is that men felt entitled to marry somebody else however this decision was rarely negotiated with the first wife. Where consent was not sought, the decision often led to separation, except for a few cases where the woman stayed in the marriage in the hope for a change. Often men had a sense of entitlement in justifying their urge for a new wife.

The participant in the quote above exposes the paradox of polygamous practices, whereby men should be able to support every wife at a similar standard if they wanted to pursue polygamy in a way that is more aligned with the Quran's norms on polygamy. However, this is a rare occurrence as people who practice polygamy Islamically in the UK are often migrants with a low socio-economic status and cannot afford to support more than one family at the same time. In addition to this, they often rely on social welfare.

Likewise, and for similar reasons, the stigma of divorce falls more heavily on women than it does on men.

As demonstrated by the qualitative data in this study, religious institutions fail to develop an inclusive procedure for women seeking a divorce when needed. A recent study argues that Muslim society stigmatises the practice of divorce to an extent that Muslim women prefer to live with toxic, torturous, and extremely abusive marriages rather than being labeled as a “divorcee,” and religious institutions exacerbate this approach (Maryaniwal and Talwasa 2021).

“A lot of people are scared to lose themselves by separating from their husbands”

AISHA

The fact that most of the participants had indeed divorced demonstrates that Muslim women are not helpless victims of their patriarchal system but, on the contrary, actively negotiate their position in the family going against cultural and religious norms.

Not being able to bear children was also seen as an acceptable reason to both men and women for the men to move on to another wife and create a family with somebody else. This too represents a traditional gender perspective whereby women’s central role in families, communities and the broader society is that of being a mother- without this role, men felt legitimised to look for another woman who can bear children, and first wives felt they needed to go along with this decision to fulfill the motherhood imperative for a woman’s viability as a legitimate member of a married couple.

Writing about *halal* dating, Ali et al (2020) research points out that this practice is deeply gendered, with women facing more scrutiny and pressure to adhere to traditional expectations than men. Female participants often feel the need to justify their relationship choices to family and community, while male participants experience comparatively more freedom.

Traditional gender roles assigning women to care and responsibility for the children and other norms regarding heterosexual relations underpin Islamic beliefs and practices when it comes to polygamy. As explained in the literature review section, concerns regarding gender justice and the domination of patriarchal structures in Muslim family traditions are central to the public and policy debate around Muslim law and Islam more broadly (Kundhani 2012). A focus on gender relations, and the “subordinating” effect that Islam has upon Muslim women risks framing Western women as “enlightened” as opposed to the Muslim female subject as the “other”, a victim to cultural and religious practices’ (Bano 2008, p. 285; Mookherjee 2009, p. 157). From an intersectional perspective therefore Muslim women are subject to multiple discrimination as women, inherently ‘victimised’ by their disadvantaged position in the gender hierarchy and as Muslims within a discourse of securitisation. In order to avoid the perpetuation of a patriarchal discourse that renders women in general as ‘vulnerable’ and in need of protection, it is essential to present a contextualised understanding that takes into account broader power structures and the diverse experiences of women, as this report is aiming to do.

Along with Navqvi (2023), we argue that polygamy does not inherently cause inequality. Patriarchy and broader societal power structures are the root causes of harm, rather than polygamy itself. Non-Western women are not passive victims in need of protection, on the contrary they continuously negotiate their own positions for instance by initiating a divorce. As noted in our previous report (Vacchelli et al 2020), some women enter polygamous marriages due to limited options, especially for those considered to have “diminished value in the marriage market,” such as single mothers, widows, or women over 30. This points to an intersection of cultural norms, gender expectations, and economic factors in driving these practices. While polygamy can limit women's agency, especially when driven by religious beliefs or cultural pressures, there is a need for legal frameworks that protect women's rights in such marriages. This includes the necessity for consent, legal recognition, and protection against potential harm.

THEME 3: NEGOTIATING POLYGAMY AND RELIGION

As evident from the results of the survey, as well as the interviews and the workshops, women in polygamous relationships struggle with what they think they should accept in order to be a good Muslim. Despite the fact that accepting polygamy makes some participants feel they are religiously devout, several participants report feelings of shame when having to admit to others they are in polygamous families and prefer not to disclose this aspect of their lives in front of other members of their community. Most participants who took part in this research had overwhelmingly negative experiences of polygamy, often combined with experiences of DV and opted for divorcing the man who had moved on to a new wife and family.

“My husband got married with someone who is the same age as my son. I did not accept him marrying another woman, I would have accepted if she had already had children that need looking after, because this is *Sunna*. But my answer was no, I am not going to let you choose for me. When I got the divorce the relationship with the other wife had been going on for a few years prior to divorce. He got married in Morocco“

FATIMA

This quote reveals that in order to be a good Muslim, the participant would have accepted her husband marrying somebody else in case the new wife already had children that needed looking after. Faced with this intergenerational marriage, as the young second wife did not yet have children, the participant argued she could not accept her husband contracting a new marriage. Another workshop participants shares what happened to her daughter:

“My daughter was very in love with her husband and he was too, but my son in law was pushed by his family to look for another woman as my daughter could not have children. My daughter is religious and she accepted. The second wife got pregnant and my daughter was very upset. My daughter had to welcome the second wife, and he did ask for consent. A lot of women will divorce, she did too. It was a very sad story as her husband was in love with her”

ASHMA

The quote above also reveals that a combination of religious imperatives and cultural norms make women accept polygamy. On the other hand, divorce is fraught upon and some women, even if not settled and fundamentally unhappy in the UK, did not feel they could go back to their country of origin as they felt that the extended family and community back home would reject them as divorced single mothers.

In summary, polygamy is strictly interconnected with religion and participants, when faced with the prospect of polygamy, negotiated their faith in different ways. Some scholars argue that polygamy is becoming more common in the UK, partly due to an Islamic revival and the mainstreaming of polygamy as part of an "Islamic way of life." The rise of online matchmaking platforms, such as SecondWife.com, has also facilitated the practice as discussed in the literature review section of this report. Naqvi (2017) highlights how British media often portrays polygamous marriages in a sensationalist manner, which contributes to obscure the nuanced realities of those living in such relationships.

“When I decided to divorce, my community [Somali people in North London] did not support me, they blamed me and think I should still be married “You are taking to the Western culture”. He cannot bring the other Somali wife here, had a big wedding there and used the money that was reserved for our 6 children”

SAFYA

THEME 4: CONTESTED MARRIAGE PRACTICES

This theme is conversant with Charsley and Liversage (2013)'s work analysing how popular culture, through media representations, contributes to the construction of polygamy as a controversial and often misunderstood practice within the UK's multicultural landscape. As discussed in the literature review, public debates on polygamy are also linked to broader discussions about legal pluralism and multiculturalism. Marriage practices that diverge from Western ones, fall within the domain of religious pluralism where various religious systems coexist.

The theme "Contested marriage practices" speaks to the circumstances of many polygamous families where consent, the concept of marriage based on romantic love, age, migration, expression of religious identity through wedding rituals instead of civil marriages represent a contested terrain in the way societal and religious norms are negotiated. In the course of several workshops and interviews, first wives lamented having heard about their husband's new marriage from members of the extended family or community. In most of the cases in fact, when men were claiming their religious entitlement to polygamy, they did not ask for consent.

Another contested marriage practice that seems to have created a range of relational problems is marrying without knowing the person very well or at all, to then discover the couple is ill-matched and that the spouses have very little in common. Although the literature has discussed these marriages as 'forced marriages', in reality these are mostly consensual, especially when marriage is used as a migration strategy, i.e. one member of the couple has British citizenship and the spouse can join via family reunification. As documented in the scholarly literature, polygamy is often used as a migration strategy, which represents another way in which polygamy is a contested practice in the global North. Policy has tended to frame these marriages as 'sham marriages' in an attempt to control the for immigration purposes. According to Wray (2015), sham marriage controls aim, so far as possible, to neutralise the immigration incentive to enter a marriage so that only relationships which are sufficiently untainted are granted immigration advantages (Wray 2015). Intergenerational marriage, when men would marry much younger women who could anagraphically be their children, was also a recurrent story:

"In 2013 he started having a relationship with a teen-ager. Firstly he cheated on me with my friend who I was helping when I invited her to my place, as she had 2 children and needed help. After cheating on me with my friend he then quickly proposed to the young woman and she accepted. Initially he lied to me and said he was doing night shifts"

IMAN

Lastly, in terms of contested marriage practices, doing nikah instead of civil marriage was something that some of the women experienced:

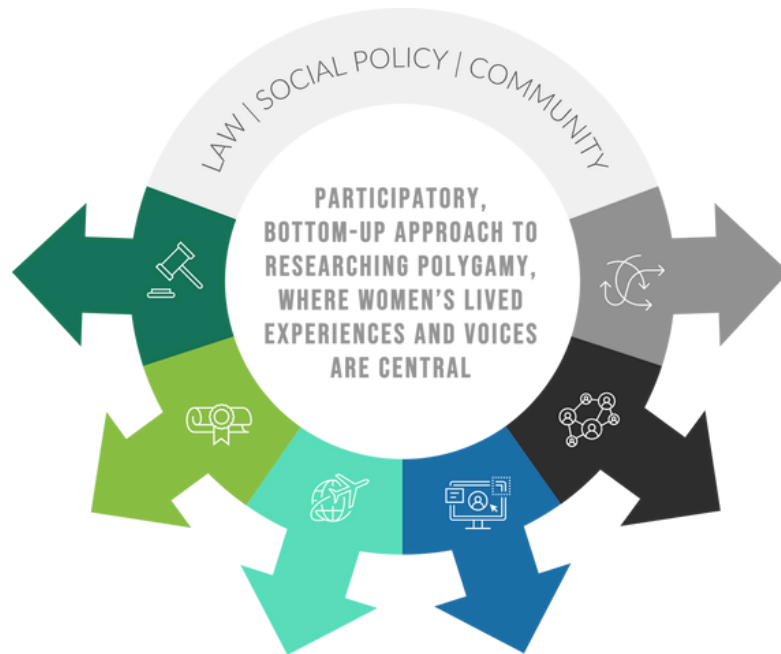
Unregistered marriages allow people to circumnavigate British legislation about bigamy and open the way for potentially polygamous marriages. However, religious marriages are highly contested because they do not offer legal protection. Registering religious marriages as a way to grant family rights to Muslim women who are not always aware of the implications of not registering their marriage is at the centre of the campaigning work of one of the experts we interviewed for this report, Aina Khan. As religious marriages as such are outside the scope of this report, we are not delving into the details of this debate, however please see the section with Aina Khan's interview to read more about this topic.

“The first marriage was a *nikah* so he was already planning to marry somebody else”

RASHIDA

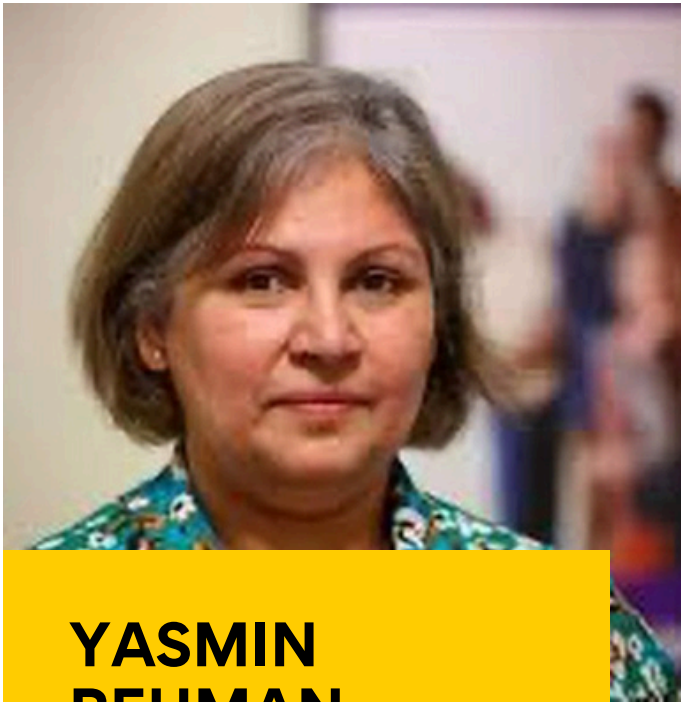
One last contested marriage practice is *halal* dating, considering that dating in Islam is strictly interconnected with marriage. As discussed in the literature review, Ali et al (2020) explain the concept of agency in *halal* dating by building on Saba Mahmood's idea of "capacity for action" where agency is understood not as rebellion against religious norms, but as a way of navigating within those norms to make choices about one's life. As happens in *halal* dating, practices around marriage serve as a means for Muslim people to explore relationships without necessarily rejecting their cultural and religious values. These negotiations stand in contrast to the stereotype that Muslim relationships are strictly controlled by family and community, devoid of personal choice.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



We need more **awareness, education, community engagement, support services** for women in polygamy **Role of community organisations** such as MEWSO **in addressing polygamy** particularly within Muslim communities **is key**: importance of culturally sensitive interventions Need for a **coordinated community response**: collaboration between **government agencies, community organisations** and **religious leaders** to develop effective strategies to prevent negative effects of polygamy: combination of **legal protection** and **community-driven mechanisms**

EXPERT INTERVIEWS, KEY POINTS ABOUT POLYGAMY IN THE UK



**YASMIN
REHMAN**

CEO of JUNO Women's Aid

In this time, she interviewed more than 100 women and men in polygamy, ranging from Albanian to Somali, Sudanese, Iranians, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Arabs to get different perspectives including Mormons, Sikhs, Indus but mainly Muslims. According to Yasmin Rehman, talking to adult children has been most heart breaking, and her experience confirms there has not been enough discussion on the effects of polygamy on children.

In the course of the interview, Jasmine highlights the following:

I interviewed Yasmin Rehman, CEO of JUNO Women's Aid in Nottingham, online in June 2024. Yasmin started studying polygamy when she was doing her master degree in 2007, focusing on Mormon polygamy and found out some of her family members in India had more than one wife. Yasmin has been studying polygamy for 15 years.

15 years

of experience studying
polygamy

100+

interviews with women and
men in polygamy

Diverse

perspectives by Mormons,
Sikhs, Indus but mainly Muslims

- Polygamy is a hidden and complex phenomenon: numbers in the UK range from 10,000 to 100,000- sometime women don't even know their husband has another wife somewhere else. Consent is very
- important- some interpretations of the Quran argue men can only re-marry with the wife's consent- while other scholars argue consent is not necessary. Because of the stigma of divorce, and the
- religious norm, consent is obtained under such constraint that the religious norm effectively subverts consent. Most interviewees in my study were not reliant on state benefits (and this is another way to
- frame the debate on polygamy which is misleading). Some households live together, and polygamy becomes a battle for resources or attention. Even in the Quran there are examples where
- Mohammed did not treat his wives equally, as Aisha was his favourite wife – this is a contentious
- subject within Islam. Children not only face rejection themselves but have to deal with their mothers' mental health following the end of marriage. Discussions gravitate on the need of men, mainly sexual
- access, or for some women if they are divorced finding a husband to 'preserve' their value as women. Not only polygamy can be a strategy for migrating, divorce can be too in a polygamous context.
- Polygamy is framed in the context of immigration rather than acknowledging it happens between British nationals. What do we need to do from a human rights perspective? Canada has really
- struggled with this issue- where there is a fine line between religious freedom and protecting people
- from harm. I am clear that polygamy provides a conducive context for the abuse of women and children and I would like to see this practice included in the list of harmful traditional marriage
- practices in international human rights.

“Talking to adult children has been most heart breaking, and my experience of conducting these interviews confirms there has not been enough discussion on the effects of polygamy on children.”

Yasmin Rehman

EXPERT INTERVIEW



**AINA
KHAN**

OBE, Family Law Specialist

I interviewed Aina Khan, Family Law specialist, in the grand building of Dawson House in Chancery Lane. This place hosted law professionals for generations and this is where Aina's offices are currently situated. Aina identified one of the key barriers in Islamic family law in the fact that people tend to not register their marriages. Her campaigning work in the past few years has focussed on raising awareness on the need to register marriages in order to guarantee that family rights are protected. In Aina's own words:

Several women call us telling us their marriage went wrong, but it turns out they weren't even married as not legally registered.

I heard this very often: what do you mean I am not married? Why didn't the government look after me? Why am I allowed to be a victim of such fraud? They expected the British Government to protect them and they were very angry and hurt.

**What do
you mean
I am not
married..?**

- Some people can be married for a week, or 30 years. When they find out about polygamy they feel broken. It's a lot of effort to find the strength to find justice after you have been through trauma, PTSD, when you have to find friends who can recommend somebody to trust. You have to find the money to get a lawyer, someone you can afford, these are hurdles, and a lot of people give up.
- Listening to these stories about 7/8 years ago, I got angry enough to start questioning the judges and say: why, why aren't you saying to the women: you are an intelligent woman, why didn't you know your marriage is not registered? I can't see you in this court-room, go away. I have seen husbands laughing in court.
- As a lawyer it is hurtful for me to see justice not done so for me it was a double whammy because the British justice system is failing and then Islam is being abused to justify this abuse, so effectively you're hijacking my faith!
- The faith from 1500 years ago says you cannot be with a woman without marrying her: publicly, the whole society needs to know who she is – you then have to support her financially, physically, socially. Once this happens you have to support the children and pay for them.
- Our law is not fit for purpose, it is completely out of date. When I speak in the house of Lord, a Baroness would say “Oh I understand, isn't it awful for these poor girls, they don't speak English and they come here and they are abused” However these are British born women who are professionals running their business and they are meticulous on everything else, they are just led into thinking marriage means what an imam says, what the husband' family says. They have such a level of trust they don't question it. Sometimes they find out this type of marriage is not going to give them any rights, they ask to be married and the husband refuses. In the majority of the cases, this doesn't happen because men already have polygamy in mind, this is about money.
- Nearly always, money is a driver, sometimes it's power and welfare, it doesn't always need to be 'men exploiting women' – turn it round there are women with money and property who don't have any interest in marrying legally as a way to preserve their wealth “ I know I can just keep him as a boyfriend, why should I give him my wealth?” There is an abuse of the marriage state to keep your own assets and income- so it's a combination of power and money more than anything else.

“Some people can be married for a week, or 30 years. When they find out about polygamy, they feel broken. It's a lot of effort to find the strength to find justice after you have been through trauma, PTSD, when you have to find friends who can recommend somebody to trust. You have to find the money to get a lawyer, someone you can afford, these are hurdles, and a lot of people give up.”

Aina Khan

- The second driver is your own parents, even if the future wife is a good person and a legal marriage is sought, they'd say "mhm I don't know, let's see how she turns up, let's test if she gives a son, then marry her. So parents are also massive gatekeepers in the marriage business. The third driver is 'being free to run' alas not wanting to commit- Islam is makes me commit, what about having the 2 things together- when it comes to actual rights, that's it. In France you have to have a civil marriage first. Here we have the 1949 Act which says that CoE, Jewish and Quakers need to marry legally, but all subsequent waves of migration are not covered by the law. After writing a report that was not sufficiently taken on board by
- the government, I started a campaign across the country speaking to people facilitated by lawyers. The campaign was met with trust as it was not government-funded and this strategy was very effective. We got the message out. It was a two pronged message: (1) You have to change that law, so that all faiths have to register their marriages, and not only some groups. To be clear, I am not asking for nikah to be recognised- people get that wrong. I am saying the opposite, I am saying 'leave the Islamic marriages alone, do what you want in your own time". Every British resident should be treated equally and this should be a default position- in other words, at the point of marriage you should be legally married. If you want to opt out, feel free to take steps to opt out . Children should be told since the age of 15 that marriage gives you rights, being together does not. (2) We must raise the awareness of what your legal rights are within marriage. What concerned me is that there was more polygamy in the UK than there was
- in Muslim countries- where they were regulating it really strictly- where you would have had to justify polygamy to the judges, for instance when a woman cannot have children and you have to have the first wife's written permission. Don't use your lens to understand the context in which polygamy emerged, it is different . The point is that some women want polygamy to achieve protection. Very few people can
- afford to support more wives but it is constantly used as a migration strategy. As migration is such a contentious issue right now, I will not allow this campaign to bash Islam. Polygamy can also be seen as sexual licence. If I had to choose a recommendation this would be changing and updating the 1949 Marriage Act so that in 21st Century Britain we don't pick and choose faiths, make it applicable to
- everyone. All religious marriages should be registered and not only some as per the 1949 Marriage Act. Duty should not be with the venue to register the marriage, it should be on the couple, i.e. taking ownership of the marriage.

"After writing a report that was not sufficiently taken on board by the government, I started a campaign across the country speaking to people facilitated by lawyers... It was a two pronged message: (1) You have to change that law, so that all faiths have to register their marriages, and not only some groups...(2) We must raise the awareness of what your legal rights are within marriage."

AINA KHAN

EXPERT INTERVIEW



HALALEH TAHERI

CEO of MEWSo (Middle Eastern Women society organisation)

I interviewed Halaleh Taheri, a Kurdish women's rights activist, founder and CEO of MEWSo, in the new MEWSo offices located in St Mary's Neighbourhood Centre. Halaleh spoke passionately about her mission: "I came from a war zone which has shaped my entire life. I have been an asylum seeker across two continents and five countries. My experiences inspired me to create an organisation entirely dedicated to women's rights. I want to ensure these women who have left their homes are recognised and treated with dignity and respect in their new countries". MEWSo offers a broad spectrum of services to women, ranging from domestic violence (DV) support to social activities like cooking sessions and housing assistance. Their efforts include addressing safety concerns, especially during turbulent times such as the far-right riots in the summer of 2024.

The organisation also focuses on movement building, raising awareness, and working with authorities to bring about systemic change. Notable achievements include MEWSo's campaigns against virginity testing and its advocacy for domestic violence survivors, LGBTQ+ rights, and migrant women's rights. Halaleh highlights the organisation's core belief: empowering women is key to creating meaningful societal change. Halaleh's campaigning for raising awareness on polygamy is waived into her own family history as can be seen from the key points of her interview:

MEWSo offers a broad spectrum of services to women ranging from DV support to social activities like cooking sessions and housing assistance

- “Polygamy is deeply rooted in the traditions of my community. I am Kurdish from Iran, and I come from a remote village situated on a high mountain between Iran and Iraq. My grandfather had 13 wives. This was partly because my grandfather was a major of town and held significant political power during the Shah’s era. His marriages symbolised his influence and reach—he had a wife from the Iraqi side, another from the Iranian side, and even a Jewish wife, who had to convert to Islam in order to marry him”.
- Halaleh’s journey through countries such as Sweden and the UK brought her face-to-face with the reality that polygamy persists, even in the UK. She began collaborating with the University of Greenwich in 2018 to investigate loopholes in UK law.
- While bigamy is illegal in Britain, polygamy can occur if a man brings wives from countries where it is legal or through unregistered religious marriages, such as Nikah ceremonies.
- Women resident from our community are often widowed, financially vulnerable, or isolated, these women may enter polygamous marriages due to societal pressure or the stigma surrounding singlehood.
- Migrant Women are facing financial struggles, lack of legal status (NRPF), and community expectations, these women are often coerced into polygamous marriages, trusting religious and familial guidance. These women are particularly vulnerable, with many unaware of their rights or the consequences of unregistered marriages.
- To address these issues, MEWSo was advocating to create ‘Safety Before Status’ document for migrant women’s rights. By working with eight other organisations, MEWSo has secured temporary protections for women without papers, ensuring they are not deported during their asylum application process.

“Closing the gap between communities and society is essential. Through education and opportunity, we can create a future where women are respected and empowered, no matter their background or circumstances”

Halaleh Taheri

- We liaise with solicitors, provide support, and help these women find safety. Our advisors play a vital role in building their self-esteem, encouraging them to prioritise safety for themselves and their children.” Moroccan women entering the UK as second wives to gain legal residency. The impact of
- polygamy on children is profound, often resulting in strained family dynamics, isolation, and long-term trauma. Halaleh envisions a future where community and broader society work more closely together
- to bridge the cultural gaps that marginalise women. She calls for increased education, governmental support for women’s organisations, and greater enforcement of existing laws on polygamy. “The government needs to enforce legislation more vigilantly to prevent men from bringing multiple wives
- into the UK. Schools should provide sex and relationship education, addressing domestic abuse and polygamy alongside existing topics like virginity testing.” Halaleh believes that education, social media, and showcasing role models are vital tools for empowering women and fostering societal change. From providing housing support to advocating for legislative reform, MEWSO continues to
- play a crucial role in supporting women. Halaleh’s work stands as a testament to the power of resilience and determination. “Closing the gap between communities and society is essential.
- Through education and opportunity, we can create a future where women are respected and empowered, no matter their background or circumstances.”

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