

## BETWEEN POLYGyny AND MONOGAMY

### Marriage in Saudi Arabia and Beyond<sup>1</sup>

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#### Abstract

*Saudi Arabia has long been portrayed as a “hub of polygyny,” a practice of marriage in which a man marries several women simultaneously. However, my recent research among Saudi male youths suggests that this practice is waning nowadays. A younger generation in the Kingdom seems to prefer monogamy—a man marrying one wife—to polygamy for several essential reasons, factors, and arguments. Based on interviews and conversations with several young Saudis as well as outcomes of survey findings, this article tries to debunk the myth of polygyny in the Kingdom and attempts to understand the rationales and logic behind monogamy choice among male (and female) youths of contemporary Saudi Arabia. The article also briefly highlights the practice of polygyny and monogamy in multiple societies outside Saudi Arabia to compare and gain knowledge on various practices of marriage. Seen from another viewpoint, the article is a reflection of a modern-day fruitful socio-cultural development and change in Saudi Arabia that have received enthusiastic and public acclaim across the globe.*

*[Arab Saudi sejak lama telah digambarkan sebagai ‘pusat poligini’, sebuah praktik pernikahan satu laki-laki dengan sejumlah perempuan*

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*secara simultan. Namun dalam penelitian saya terbaru terhadap sejumlah laki-laki muda Arab menyatakan praktik poligini mulai memudar saat ini. Generasi muda di wilayah kerajaan Arab tampaknya mulai memilih monogami, daripada poligami, dengan beberapa alasan, faktor dan argumen yang mendasar. Berdasarkan wawancara dan percakapan dengan sejumlah pemuda Arab yang temuannya menunjukkan, seperti dalam artikel ini adalah menyanggah mitos poligini di kerajaan Saudi dan usaha memahami rasionalitas dan logika monogami pemuda dan pemudi di Arab Saudi dewasa ini. Artikel ini juga sekilas membahas praktik poligini dan monogami di luar Arab Saudi sebagai perbandingan dan pengetahuan mengenai ragam bentuk praktik pernikahan diberbagai masyarakat. Dengan sudut pandang lain, artikel ini mencerminkan kehidupan modern dari aneka perkembangan sosial budaya dan perubahan di Arab Saudi yang menerima semangat dan penerimaan publik lintas dunia.]*

**Keywords:** Muslim, marriage, monogamy, polygyny, Saudi Arabia, the Middle East

## A. Introduction

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has undergone a massive socio-cultural-religious change in various sectors and domains such as education (including female education), tourism, employment, entertainment industry, sport, dress, religious practice, marriage system, gender roles and relations, among many others. Business, industry, and economic sectors have also changed and developed enormously. This productive change is not simply to fulfill the “directive” of Saudi Vision 2030<sup>2</sup> (i.e., a strategic framework to reduce Saudi Arabia’s dependence on oil, diversify its economy, and develop public service sectors) but also an outcome of the lengthy process of education, modernization, globalization, developmentalism, and rationalization in the society.

One of my curiosities concerning this new socio-cultural development is about the phenomena of practice, choice, and perspective

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<sup>2</sup> A detailed information on the Saudi Vision 2030 can be read at . “Homepage: The Progress & Achievements of Saudi Arabia”, *Vision 2030*, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/>, accessed 24 Sep 2021.

on marriage<sup>3</sup> among the Saudi young generation, especially male youths. Several queries that intrigue me include: how do male youths of Saudi Arabia view or perceive polygyny? Do they prefer polygyny to monogamy or vice versa? What are the factors and rationales behind their choices and preferences?

A form of polygamy or multiple marriages (i.e., marriage to more than one spouse at a time), polygyny (literally means “many wives”) is a marriage in which two or more women (wives) share a husband. This article primarily focuses on the study of contemporary social phenomena of Saudi society concerning the concept and practice of marriage, particularly polygyny<sup>4</sup> and monogamy,<sup>5</sup> as well as the explanation of rationales and arguments of Saudi youths’ choices and viewpoints on monogamous marriage. One of the article’s objectives is to highlight and illustrate important features of change and progress in Saudi Arabia through the lens of changing marriage patterns and practices. To gain knowledge and broaden perspectives on the practice of polygamous and monogamous marriage, this article also briefly highlights this practice in non-Saudi societies and cultures, in both Muslim and non-Muslim-majority countries.

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<sup>3</sup> Marriage means different things in different societies. There is no such definite definition of marriage. However, anthropologists generally define marriage as a series of customs formalizing the relationship between adult partners within the family. It is a socially approved union between two or more adult partners that regulates the sexual and economic rights and obligations between them. See Joy Hendry, *An Introduction to Social Anthropology: Sharing Our Worlds* (New York: NYU Press, 2008), pp. 222–5.

<sup>4</sup> Polygyny, a form of polygamy, generally refers to a system of marriage involving more than one spouse (male or female) in which a man (husband) marries more than one wife. Another type of polygamy is polyandry, i.e., a marriage practice in which a woman (wife) has more than one man (husband). It takes many forms across cultures. In some societies, one wife is shared by brothers, whereas in other cultures, a father and son have a common wife. In the Arsi region of Ethiopia, a man can take up to 11 wives. See Paul Valley, “The Big Question: What’s the history of polygamy, and how serious a problem is it in Africa”, *The Independent* (6 Jan 2010), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/the-big-question-what-s-the-history-of-polygamy-and-how-serious-a-problem-is-it-in-africa-1858858.html>, accessed 25 Sep 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Monogamy is a system of marriage involving one person marrying one other. Another form of monogamy is called serial monogamy, namely marriage in which a person takes a number of different spouses one after another rather than at the same time. See Hendry, *An Introduction to Social Anthropology*.

The sources used in this article, among others, were based on research findings of my fieldwork that involved interviews and conversations with around 30 Saudi youths (aged 20–25 years) from multiple regions in the Kingdom (their real names are anonymous in this article) as well as assessment of media, research, or survey reports and other relevant sources (books, articles). In other words, this article is not intended to provide a thorough analysis of the discourse of polygyny/monogamy in Islam nor is it a critical account of the debate about polygyny/monogamy among Muslim legal scholars. There are plenty of academic works available on this subject; thereby, there is no need for me to repeat this issue in this article.<sup>6</sup> Yet, I briefly discuss the opinions and arguments of some Islamic scholars concerning issues of polygyny and monogamy in Islam.

Saudi Arabia is one of the Muslim-majority countries, where polygyny is still legal. Other countries where polygamous marriage is officially permitted by the government include South Africa, Egypt, Eritrea, Morocco, and Malaysia. Iran and Libya also legalize polygyny with the written consent of the first wife.<sup>7</sup> In other countries such as Israel, Chechnya, or Burma, polygyny is illegal, but the law is not enforced. The Indonesian government, generally, does not permit polygyny for its employees or civil servants, particularly PNS<sup>8</sup> (Pegawai Negeri Sipil). In essence, the Indonesian Marriage Law (Undang-Undang Perkawinan,

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<sup>6</sup> See for example, Maha A.Z. Yamani, *Polygamy and Law in Contemporary Saudi Arabia* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2008); Nina Nurmila, *Women, Islam and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2009); Debra Majeed, *Polygyny: What It Means When African American Muslim Women Share Their Husbands* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2016); Miriam Koktvedgaard Zeitzen, *Elite Malay Polygamy: Wives, Wealth and Woes in Malaysia* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018); Miriam Koktvedgaard Zeitzen, *Polygamy: A Cross-Cultural Analysis* (Oxford ; New York: Routledge, 2008).2008

<sup>7</sup> Zeitzen, *Polygamy*.

<sup>8</sup> PNS (Pegawai Negeri Sipil) is part of a government civil apparatus or Aparat Sipil Negara (ASN). Another type of ASN is Pegawai Pemerintah dengan Perjanjian Kerja (PPPK) or a contract-based government employee. To my knowledge, the prohibition of polygyny is only applied to members of PNS. However, according to Peraturan Pemerintah No. 45 Tahun 1990, a government's regulation on marriage and divorce for PNS, a male PNS, under a strict condition, could take a second wife, if approved by his chairman where he works, while female PNS is forbidden to be a second or third wife.

namely UU No. 1/1974) follows a principle of monogamous marriage. Yet, it also provides room for polygyny under certain conditions or circumstances (e.g., the wife does not give birth or has a permanent disease; thereby, the husband cannot have sexual intercourse). The process should be through a court. If the court approves the husband's request for polygyny, it will issue a permit for polygyny.<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, unlike popular opinions that generally tend to see and believe that the majority of Saudis practice polygyny, this article suggests that the contemporary Saudi male youths tend to choose monogamy as a preferable marriage for some fundamental reasons, ranging from low cost to the economic shortage. A common expression of young Saudis whom I interviewed with is as follows: "How can I have some wives while it is difficult to have or get married even to one wife"? Similar to my observation and research findings, David Long, a scholar of the Middle East studies, wrote, "Although allowed under Islam, polygamy is dying out in Saudi Arabia".<sup>10</sup>

Even though polygyny was a common phenomenon for some groups of societies in the past of Saudi Arabia, particularly since the late 1970s or early 1980s due to, primarily, the emergence of Islamism, Islamic revivalism, and conservatism that began to take control of the Kingdom's religious policies (starting from the era of King Khalid's reign), the article argues that such a marriage practice tends to decline in recent years. In fact, some studies have argued that monogamy is the dominant marriage practice in the Arabian Peninsula not only in the contemporary

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<sup>9</sup> Erizka Permatasari, "Hukum Poligami dan Prosedurnya yang Sah di Indonesia", *bukumonline.com*, <https://www.hukumonline.com/klinik/a/hukum-poligami-dan-prosedurnya-yang-sah-di-indonesia-lt5136cbfaaeef9>, accessed 24 Sep 2021. See also the Indonesian Marriage Law (UU Perkawinan No. 1/1974), for instance, Article 4 that permits a husband to be polygamous, "UU No. 1 Tahun 1974 tentang Perkawinan", *Database Peraturan JDIH BPK RI*, <https://peraturan.bpk.go.id/Home/Details/47406/uu-no-1-tahun-1974>, accessed 24 Sep 2021. The permit of polygyny also can be found in the Indonesian Compilation of Islamic Law (Kompilasi Hukum Islam, 1/1991), "Direktori Putusan", *Direktori Putusan Mahkamah Agung RI*, <https://putusan3.mahkamahagung.go.id/peraturan/detail/11e9da0c8167c5c0b9c2313930343435.html>, accessed 24 Sep 2021.

<sup>10</sup> David E. Long, *Culture and Customs of Saudi Arabia* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood, 2005), p. 40.

era but also in the past.<sup>11</sup> The data from the Saudi General Authority of Statistics also indicates that, although a significant number of Saudis have practiced polygyny, many of them are also monogamous.

Research findings from conversations and interviews with Saudi youths presented in this article are to underpin the monogamy practice in the Kingdom's past. The decline of polygyny in Saudi Arabia contrasts with Indonesia or Malaysia in which polygamous marriage has become popular and an increasingly prominent practice among some Muslim groups (e.g., urban Salafis) in recent years. Nevertheless, the practice of polygyny is not a new phenomenon in Indonesia. In the past, kings (or sultans) and other kingdoms' elite members had long practiced polygyny. Some Muslim clerics (such as *kiais*) of Nahdlatul Ulama (arguably, Indonesia's largest Muslim social organization) have also practiced polygyny. However, the popularity of polygyny among the Indonesian populace, in general, has only taken place recently, mainly due to the rise of Islamic populism after the downfall of Suharto's rule. Furthermore, worldwide public opinions (including those of Indonesians) on polygyny among Saudis are similar to those of Mormons (Letter-day Saints church adherents). In reality, the majority of Mormons, as revealed by the historian Jessie Embry, do not practice polygyny.<sup>12</sup>

Hence, the data presented in this article challenge the widely held but mistaken belief that Saudi society favors polygyny because of Islamic ruling, Qur'anic injunction, or prophetic tradition (i.e., Prophet Muhammad's practice of polygyny). Although Islam, theoretically, allows polygyny, in reality, such a concept is difficult to implement because of a variety of factors and reasons. Seeing from another standpoint, monogamy choices among the youth is a mirror of a shifting socio-cultural-religious phenomenon in the social field of present-day Saudi society as well as a reflection of the impact of rapid modernization, globalization, education, and rationalization in the Kingdom taking place since the last decades.

This article is informed by—and to some extent reinforces—two

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<sup>11</sup> Saeed Hamdan, "Social Change in the Saudi Family", PhD. Dissertation (Iowa: Iowa State University, 1990); Long, *Culture and Customs of Saudi Arabia*.

<sup>12</sup> Jessie L. Embry, "The History of Polygamy", *History to Go* (1994), <https://historytogo.utah.gov/history-polygamy/>, accessed 15 Sep 2021.

theories, namely theories of social change<sup>13</sup>, especially “linked change”, and rational choice theory (also called rational action theory or choice theory). Theories of social change, both old and new, underscore the significance of a change in society. Some societies (usually small-scale, preliterate, and technologically simple societies) tend to change slowly, while others (especially large-scale, literate, industrialized, and technologically advanced societies) tend to change much more rapidly. Various factors, including religion, politics, levels of social interaction, and technological development, contributed to degrees of change in society. Social changes in Saudi Arabia take slower than other countries in the Gulf area (United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman). Only in recent years, had Saudi Arabia started to undergo a rapid societal change. Nonetheless, whatever the rate of change, it is obvious that, as the theories suggest, nothing is as constant as change.

The theories commonly assume that the course of social change is not arbitrary (based on random choice or personal whim) but is, to a certain degree, regular or patterned. The patterns of social change might take a cyclic or one-directional form. Whatever the pattern that might take, one clear thing is that social change is always linked. Anthropologists understand cultures more than the sum of their parts. Rather cultures are systematic wholes, the parts of which are, to some degree, interconnected. If cultures truly are integrated wholes, it would follow that a change in one part of the culture would be likely to bring about changes in other parts. This is what anthropologists call “linked changes.” Marriage, the article’s focus, is part of the culture. Accordingly, marriage systems, institutions, and practices are also connected to other cultures. This is why Peter Riviere, a noted British social anthropologist, wrote “marriage as an isolable phenomenon of study is a misleading illusion”.<sup>14</sup> This

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<sup>13</sup> In sociology, social change refers to the alteration of mechanisms within the social structure, which is typified by changes in cultural symbols, rules of behaviors, social organizations, or value systems. On the basic idea of social change theories, see Nico Wilterdink and William Form, “Social Change: Definition, Types, Theories, Causes, & Examples”, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-change>, accessed 20 Feb 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Peter.G. Riviere, “Marriage: A Reassessment”, in *Rethinking Kinship and Marriage*, ed. by Rodney Needham (London & New York: Tavistock Publications, 1971), p. 57.

means that those who study marriage should look at it as part of the wider social system and society where it is found. Socio-cultural systems are interlinked; therefore, marriage as part of these systems should be viewed and analyzed along with other systems. Changes in marriage practice, hence, might be the fruit of changes in other systems such as religion, politics, economy, education, and so forth. It is for this reason that this article also looks at various factors and social systems that might influence Saudi Arabia's marriage practice.

The second theory is the rational choice theory, which is a school of thought based on the assumption or supposition that individuals select a course of action that matches their personal preferences.<sup>15</sup> It states that individuals use their self-interests to make choices that will provide them with the greatest advantage. People weigh their options and make the choice they think will serve them best. Although the theory is originally applied in the context of microeconomics, it is also increasingly used in other areas and fields to model human decision-making. As this article has shown, contemporary Saudi youths' choices of marriage are also based on the rational considerations and calculations (e.g., the advantage and disadvantages of having polygamous or monogamous marriage) or personal preferences, not simply to follow Qur'anic injunctions or Prophet Muhammad's practices.

## **B. Monogamy and Polygamy in Multiple Societies**

The tendency that contemporary young Saudis favor monogamy seems to be in line with a recent report of Pew Research Center, stating that polygamy—both polygyny and polyandry—is rare throughout most of the modern world nowadays. Even though in some Asian and Middle Eastern countries, polygamy, especially polygyny, is permitted but not practiced broadly. The report, based on 2010-2018 census and survey data, excludes some countries in West and Central Africa (known as “the polygamy belt”) where the practice is lawful and widespread. Moreover, the report also shows that only about 2 percent of the global population lives in polygamous households (meaning that the majority

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<sup>15</sup> A brief explanation of this theory can be read at S.M. Amadae, *Rational Choice Theory: Definition, Examples, & Facts*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/rational-choice-theory>, accessed 22 Feb 2022.



is monogamous marriage), and in the vast majority of countries, that share is under 0.5 percent.<sup>16</sup>

Even though the data of the Pew Research Center above shows the decay of polygyny practice in the modern era, historically (to some extent, it still exists until now in some societies), polygyny has long been an acceptable marriage practice in multiple religious, ethnic, and tribal societies throughout the world. Critics might say that polygyny does not fit the image of modern society. But for some societies (e.g., some African tribal groups), polygyny is a part of showing respect towards their cultures and customs. Some Muslims or Mormons who practice polygamous marriage also view it as an integral part of their religious teachings, principles, and devotions.

Some anthropologists argue and believe that polygamy has been the norm throughout human history before its waning in the modern era.<sup>17</sup> Patricia Dixon, a professor at Georgia State University who specializes in the study of marriage and family, reveals that, in the past centuries, before the European world domination, throughout history, over 80 percent of the world's societies and cultures, including the West, had practiced polygyny.<sup>18</sup> Even in the West, Dixon has argued, polygyny has always been practiced in some groups of societies. However, she contends, because polygyny is done under a myth of monogamy, this creates a “peculiar” form of the practice. This odd type of polygyny, for example, was practiced among Greek and Roman people in early European history. Polygyny was also practiced during slavery in the United States to the detriment of African American women and their families.<sup>19</sup>

In 2003, *New Scientist* magazine suggested that, until 10,000 years ago, most children had been sired by comparatively few men.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Stephanie Kramer, ‘Polygamy is rare around the world and mostly confined to a few regions’, *Pew Research Center*, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/12/07/polygamy-is-rare-around-the-world-and-mostly-confined-to-a-few-regions/>, accessed 15 Feb 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Hendry, *An Introduction to Social Anthropology*; Patricia Dixon, *We Want for Our Sisters What We Want for Ourselves: African American Women Who Practice Polygyny by Consent* (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, Inprint Editions, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> Dixon, *We Want for Our Sisters What We Want for Ourselves*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Valley, ‘The Big Question’.

Additionally, in 1998, the University of Wisconsin surveyed 1,231 groups of small-scale societies around the world. Of these, just 186 were monogamous. Total 588 had frequent polygyny, 453 had occasional polygyny, and 4 had polyandry, although more recent research findings suggest that the practice of polyandry is more common than before.<sup>21</sup>

Likewise, polygyny was practiced by—and was a part of cultures of—ancient Israelites, people in the Indian subcontinent, classical Chinese society, Native Americans, Polynesians, and Greeks before the advent of the Roman Empire and Roman Catholic Church.<sup>22</sup> In the United States, some Mormons have also practiced polygyny.<sup>23</sup> In 2005, according to *The Salt Lake Tribune*, as many as 10,000 Mormon fundamentalists lived in polygamous families.<sup>24</sup> Jessie Embry, a specialist of Mormon studies, said that although Mormon church founder, Joseph Smith, married his first plural wife (Fanny Alger) in 1835, polygamy was not openly practiced in the Mormon Church until 1852. It was the apostle Orson Pratt, who made a public speech that defended polygyny as a tenet of the Letter-day Saints (Mormon) church. Between 1852 and 1890, Embry wrote, Mormon church leaders preached and encouraged members, particularly those having leadership positions, to marry additional wives.<sup>25</sup>

It is worth mentioning that, although Mormons and Muslims permit polygyny under certain conditions, its concept and practice differ from one another. For example, Muslim husbands could take up to four wives, whereas Mormon husbands could marry only two wives. Unlike the Muslim community in which all wives of polygamous husbands usually live in the same house (such as *harem*<sup>26</sup>), Mormon wives generally lived

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<sup>21</sup> J. Patrick Gray, “Ethnographic Atlas Codebook”, *World Cultures*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1998), pp. 86–136.

<sup>22</sup> Zeitzen, *Polygamy*; Dixon, *We Want for Our Sisters What We Want for Ourselves*.

<sup>23</sup> Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 1989); Craig L. Foster and Marianne T. Watson, *American Polygamy: A History of Fundamentalist Mormon Faith* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2019).

<sup>24</sup> Valley, “The Big Question”.

<sup>25</sup> Embry, “The History of Polygamy”.

<sup>26</sup> According to the Cambridge Dictionary, *harem*, especially in the past, refers to ‘women in a Muslim home, including wives and other family members, servants, and female partners of a man, or the part of a house in which these women live’, “Harem”, *the Cambridge English Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/>

in separate homes and have a direct responsibility to their children. In the case the wives live near each other, the Mormon husbands usually visit each wife on a daily or weekly basis.<sup>27</sup>

In the modern era, according to the late sociologist Remi Clignet, polygyny is more widespread in Africa than in other continents.<sup>28</sup> Other specialists of African societies such as Hanan Jacoby and James Fenske also confirmed that, in African countries stretching from Senegal to Tanzania, it is common to find more than one-third of married women to be polygamous.<sup>29</sup> A recent report of the Pew Research Center also confirms this observation. The report suggests that polygamy is more often found in sub-Saharan Africa than other areas of the world, where 11 percent of the populace lives in arrangements consisting of more than one spouse. More specifically, the report indicates that polygamy is prevalent in West and Central Africa, including Burkina Faso (36 percent, Mali (34 percent), and Nigeria (28 percent), where polygamy is legal.<sup>30</sup>

These data sketched above show that polygyny was one of the favorable marriage choices among societies throughout history, including in small-scale tribal societies. In brief, anthropologically speaking, in the previous centuries, polygyny was a marriage and family practice recognized by many societies across the world, and this practice continues in some societies. Interestingly, Muslims are not the only group that practices polygyny. Nonetheless, many outsiders (non-Muslims) in the contemporary era generally know polygyny because of (some) Muslims' practice of this marriage. In other words, even though many (or the majority of) Muslims do not practice polygyny, they have contributed to the spread of polygyny ideas to non-Muslim societies in the modern era. Moreover, outsiders generally view or perceive polygyny among

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harem, accessed 1 Aug 2021..

<sup>27</sup> Foster and Watson, *American Polygamy*; Majeed, *Polygyny*.

<sup>28</sup> Remi Clignet, *Many Wives, Many Powers: Authority and Power in Polygynous Families* (Evanston, [Ill.]: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> Hanan G. Jacoby, "The Economics of Polygyny in Sub-Saharan Africa: Female Productivity and the Demand for Wives in Côte d'Ivoire", *Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 103, no. 5 (1995), pp. 938–71; James Fenske, "African polygamy: Past and present", *Journal of Development Economics*, vol. 117 (2015), pp. 58–73.

<sup>30</sup> Kramer, "Polygamy is rare around the world and mostly confined to a few regions".

Muslim societies as something related to harems, as portrayed by Hollywood movies, namely the wives or other female sexual partners (e.g., concubines) of a man, or the part of the house in which they, including female servants, live. They also frequently view polygyny through sexual connotations and male power versus female powerlessness.

Polygyny is a complex system of marriage involving various motives. In African societies, for instance, multiple factors contribute to polygamous marriage. Some scholars suggested that the slave trade is one of the primary factors contributing to the appearance, spread, and fortification of polygyny in Africa, leading to prolonged periods of abnormal sex ratios, which, in turn, impacted the rates of polygyny across Africa.<sup>31</sup> Other scholars linked polygyny in Africa to slow growth, reduced investment in girls' human capital, diminished labor supply of unmarried men, or the sexual division of labor in the hoe-farming, among others.<sup>32</sup> The term hoe-farming refers to primitive forms of agriculture, defined by the absence of the plough. Still, high levels of infant mortality have been one of the major factors of Africa's polygyny; when many children do not survive past the age of five years, a family needs more than one child-bearer to be economically viable.<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, English social anthropologist, the late Jack Goody, using *Ethnographic Atlas*, demonstrates the historical link between polygyny in many sub-Saharan African societies and the practice of extensive shifting agriculture. He observed that, in some of the sparsely populated regions in Africa where shifting cultivation takes place, much of the work is done by women, and this case favored polygamous marriages in which men sought to monopolize the production of women who are valued both as workers and as child bearers. In contrast with Goody's analysis,

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<sup>31</sup> John T. Dalton and Tin Cheuk Leung, "Why Is Polygyny More Prevalent in Western Africa? An African Slave Trade Perspective", *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, vol. 62, no. 4 (2014), pp. 599–632; Jacoby, "The Economics of Polygyny in Sub-Saharan Africa"; Fenske, "African polygamy".

<sup>32</sup> Ester Boserup, *Woman's Role in Economic Development* (London: Cromwell Press, 1970); Jacoby, "The Economics of Polygyny in Sub-Saharan Africa"; Fenske, "African polygamy".

<sup>33</sup> Valley, "The Big Question"; Jack Goody, *Production and Reproduction: A Comparative Study of the Domestic Domain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 27–9.

Fenske found that ecologically related economic shocks, alongside child mortality, had a stronger association with the rates of polygamy in sub-Saharan Africa rather than female agricultural contributions.<sup>34</sup>

Another reason for polygyny is to increase a country's population. In 2001, President Omar al-Bashir of Sudan (r. 1993–2019) urged men to take more than one wife to increase his country's populace, arguing that it was the huge populations of China and India that had brought them fast economic growth. Last but not the least, a lot of traditional African societies had the custom of widow inheritance to retain the extended family and its wealth and property, together, whereas some African Americans practice polygyny, Dixon said, because of the shortage of available black men.<sup>35</sup>

Historically, war is also an important factor of polygyny in some cultures. In 1650, the German parliament at Nuremberg legalized polygyny (up to 10 wives) because so many men were murdered during the Thirty Years' War. It makes sense to state that when many men die in warfare, having more than one wife would boost the populace most rapidly. In theory, the more wives a man (husband) had, the more military and political alliances he could forge. Some cultures practice polygyny because having multiple wives, to follow Weberian tradition, can be a source of prestige, wealth, and power. In other words, wealth, social status, and power became wrapped up in the number of wives a man had. A bigger extended family from multiple wives has been a basis and source of pride and "man-ness," whereas a lesser one was a sign of failure (fiasco) and disgrace.<sup>36</sup>

### C. Polygyny and Monogamy in Islam and Saudi Arabia

Like other societies in various parts of the world described earlier, Muslim and Saudi societies also have reasons for either choosing polygyny

<sup>34</sup> Fenske, "African polygamy".

<sup>35</sup> Dixon, *We Want for Our Sisters What We Want for Ourselves*.

<sup>36</sup> This phenomenon is in sharp contrast to some societies. For example, in a society with too few resources and too many people, polyandry is a way of limiting population growth. A woman can only have so many children, no matter how many husbands she has. Polyandry also takes place in a small-scale society living in an isolated area where wealthy women require some men to take care of or work on her plantation, cattle, and other important needs (e.g., trading crops and livestock).

or monogamy. In Saudi Arabia, some men practice polygamous marriage because of, among others, Islamic religious values and tenets, besides the government support and policy. The basis of the Saudi government's law of marriage is the Islamic Law of Hanbali *madhhab* (school of thought), the Kingdom's official *madhhab* of Islamic jurisprudence. However, although religion and politics provide support to—or do not prevent Saudis from—polygyny, not all Saudi societies practice it.

For Saudis (and Muslims in general) who practice polygyny, Islam has been an important source of inspiration. Indeed, although not encouraging, the Qur'an does not forbid polygyny. Theoretically, as stated in the Qur'an, 4: 3, a husband could take up to four wives if he is qualified and could treat them fairly. In other words, the concept of polygyny in Islam is for specific circumstances and under special conditions. The Qur'an, moreover, advises monogamy if a husband worries that he cannot treat their wives justly. The Qur'an, 4: 3 states, "If you fear you might fail to give orphan women their 'due' rights 'if you were to marry them', then marry other women of your choice—two, three, or four. However, if you are afraid you will fail to maintain justice, then 'content yourselves with' one or those 'bondwomen' in your possession. This way you are less likely to commit injustice." According to Islamic law, building on the Qur'an and Hadith, there are strict requirements to marrying more than one woman as the man must treat them equally financially and in terms of support given to each wife.

However, Islamic scholars vary in their opinions about—and interpretations of the concept and practice of—polygyny.<sup>37</sup> Some have endorsed polygyny enthusiastically stating that this marriage practice is not only mentioned in the Qur'an but was also practiced by Prophet Muhammad. They believe and claim that Islam enshrines polygyny as a male right. Indeed, Muslim supporters of polygyny often cite and legitimize their polygamous marriage by quoting the Quran verse 4:3, which instructs men to take wives up to four, besides pointing out Muhammad's multiple wives. Yet, other scholars consider polygyny a secondary option, stating that it is neither the main mandate of the Qur'an nor the primary choice of Prophet Muhammad. While some see polygyny as permitted but disheartened in the favor of monogamy,

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<sup>37</sup> Zeitzen, *Polygamy*; Nurmila, *Women, Islam and Everyday Life*; Majeed, *Polygyny*.

others argue that Islam implicitly prohibits polygyny.

Nina Nurmila categorizes Muslim opinions of polygyny into three groups, namely, (1) those that allow polygamy, (2) those that permit polygyny if a husband can accomplish certain conditions or measures and “can be just among his wives; if not, the husband should have only one wife”, and (3) those that forbid polygamous marriage “based on the contextual reading of the whole verses of the Qur’an 4: 2, 3 and 129”.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, Saudi scholar Saeed Hamdan said that polygamy in Islam is optional. If husbands decide to have more wives, justice, as assigned in the Qur’an (4:3), must be applied among the wives for everything, including food, clothes, emotions, and sexual relations. He said that husbands who choose polygyny but do not treat their wives justly will commit a sin and will be punished by God. He argues that polygamous marriage is known to prevail mainly during periods of hardship and after wars.<sup>39</sup>

Historians, furthermore, have noted that the verse on polygyny appeared amid wars in Arabia in the seventh century that caused deaths of many Muslims, resulting in the increase of widows and orphans that required financial support.<sup>40</sup> In this regard, polygamy created a mechanism for orphans and widows to be cared for. This is to say that the polygyny system was strongly rooted in the socio-historical contexts of warfare and the shortcomings of male Muslims because of death on the battlefield.

Principally, Islam, for anti-polygyny supporters, prefers monogamy to polygyny. In fact, the Qur’an underscores justice (i.e., husband’s fairness for their wives) as the primary requirement for polygyny, which is almost difficult to achieve for a husband. Otherwise, Muslims should opt for monogamy. Initially, Muhammad was also monogamous with his first wife, Khadija, whom he married for about 25 years. After the death of Khadija (d. 619), Muhammad practiced polygyny (mostly with widows) for political and social reasons such as to support financially and psychologically children and wives whose fathers/husbands died in the warfare. Marrying widows was a social strategy for ensuring that

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<sup>38</sup> Nina Nurmila, “The Spread of Muslim Feminist Ideas in Indonesia: Before and After the Digital Era”, *Al-Jāmi’ab: Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 59, no. 1 (2021), p. 102; Nurmila, *Women, Islam and Everyday Life*, pp. 61–3.

<sup>39</sup> Hamdan, “Social Change in the Saudi Family”, pp. 165–6.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

orphans were cared for.

Since Islam does not ban polygyny, it is normal, legal, and understandable if some Muslim men choose and practice it. In fact, with few notable exceptions (e.g., Tunisia, Albania, or countries in Central Asia, where polygyny is unlawful or discouraged), in most Muslim-majority countries, polygyny is legal or permitted under certain conditions, based on either Islamic law, government's laws, or both. Although polygyny is permitted, some countries apply some conditions or restrictions for it. Kuwait is perhaps the only Muslim-majority nation where no restrictions are imposed on it. The conditions of polygyny vary from country to country. Some countries require the husband to have permission from his previous wives as well as proof that he can financially support multiple wives, while others need a court hearing for having an additional wife. Still, countries like Sudan encourage polygyny to increase the country's population.

As a Muslim-dominated country that has formally adopted the literalist Hanbali madhhab (school) in Islamic jurisprudence and implemented a conservative interpretation of Islam, it is understandable if Saudi Arabia allows polygyny that is in line with specific guidelines (e.g., justice, which is an essential condition for permitting polygyny) and resolves certain social problems (e.g., widowhood, spinsterhood, and others). Due to limited restrictions, a sizable number of Saudi men have practiced polygyny, having either two, three, or four wives at the same time. My informants said that a Saudi husband does not require permission from the court (or approval or consent of existing wife/wives, albeit some husbands have received verbal permission from their current wives) for his new marriage.

The only prerequisite is that the husband declares that he can support all his wives financially and treat them equally. As an outcome, many women find themselves in polygyny against their will, albeit some women may select deliberately to engage in polygyny. As well, there is a limited agency of Saudi women in consenting to polygamous marriage. Furthermore, a woman has no legal avenue to prevent her husband from taking additional wives, nor to obtain a divorce upon learning of her husband's subsequent marriage. It is extremely unusual—and perceived as socially intolerable—for women to stipulate or specify in the marriage



contract to avert polygyny.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, outsiders and media have often highlighted Saudi Arabia as one of the “hubs of polygyny” practice within Muslim-dominated countries. Many also mistakenly consider marrying more than one woman in Saudi Arabia as a norm and widespread. It is true that, until now, a substantial number of Saudis have practiced polygyny. In 2016, the Saudi General Authority of Statistics had revealed that around half a million Saudis have practiced polygyny, taking either two or more wives, either Saudi or foreign women.<sup>42</sup> Of this number, around 73,000 men were between the ages of 25 and 49 years, around 411,000 between 50 and 54 years, and about 16,000 between 60 and 64 years.

The data show that men aged between 15 and 19 years were not involved in a polygamous marriage. However, if compared with the Saudi population (around 32 million in 2016 and over 35 million in 2021 with about 55.2 percent males and 44.8 percent females), the number of people who engaged in polygamous relationships is not dominant. My research findings also suggest the decline of polygyny, especially among the youths who compose the majority of the Kingdom’s populace.

Motives of polygyny in Saudi Arabia vary. According to Mansour Al-Duhaiman, a Saudi counselor of marriage and family matters, reasons for polygyny in the Kingdom include religious Islamic values and teachings that do not prevent Muslims from having more than one wife. Other factors, Al-Duhaiman underlines, are to bear out emotional, psychological, intellectual, social, or sexual needs of husbands that are not fulfilled in their first marriage. Still, some men practice polygyny because of having lack of respect and appreciation from their first wife, while others practice due to their first wife’s health problems or infertility issues. Another significant factor Al-Duhaiman highlights are that the husband might come from a family where polygamy is common. In this regard, the husband has been pressured by his society to take another spouse or the man weds another wife just to boast about his manhood.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Musawah, *Thematic Report on Muslim Family Law and Muslim Women’s Rights in Saudi Arabia* (Kuala Lumpur: Musawah for Equality in the Family, 2018), pp. 19–20.

<sup>42</sup> “Over half a million Saudis have more than one wife”, *Saudi Gazette* (26 Oct 2016), <https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/165994>, accessed 15 Feb 2021.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

Maha Yamani, a Saudi lawyer who has personal experience with polygyny, said that polygyny is the potential to grow among both the educated and the non-educated Saudis (Yamani 2008). More specifically, Yamani's study, building on a series of in-depth, personal interviews with women and men involved in the polygamous practice, explores the rise of polygyny among urban, educated women and men in the Hijaz area of Saudi Arabia. She argues that the contributing factors to polygyny are (1) the increase in prosperity and (2) a return towards fundamental Islamic religious values. She, moreover, contends that the return to polygyny is natural and legitimate. In the Kingdom, it has also been a more socially accepted way of practicing extramarital affairs. Yamani's study proposes to fill a gap in the context of Saudi Arabia's socio-legal evolvement of polygyny. Accordingly, she combined a framework that includes Islamic law and social practice, the impact of Saudi history on society, and the influence of the political system on current local marriage practices.<sup>44</sup>

Yamani seems to shed light on the often-misunderstood polygamous practice in contemporary Saudi Arabia. While some scholars, especially feminists, might see polygyny as a peculiar marriage practice, Yamani seems to see it as a normal one. Ruth Roded, commenting on Yamani's work, said that the book's objective is to place the author's findings in historical, legal, social, and political contexts.<sup>45</sup> Based on data from interviewees, Yamani argues that the practice of polygyny among the city-dwelling Hijazis in western Arabia was not as widespread as among nomadic Najdis in central Arabia. She, moreover, argues that the increase in polygyny among (some) educated Hijazis can be traced back to the late 1970s.

This growth, in particular, is due to the influence of the Najdi tribal ruling class on technocrats wishing to attain Saudi social status, aiming at accompanying their increased wealth and cementing their ties to the royal family and its entourage. Another factor contributing to the rise in polygyny, Yamani underscores, is Saudi public policy promoting

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<sup>44</sup> Zahia Smail Salhi, "Maha A. Z. Yamani Polygamy and Law in Contemporary Saudi Arabia", *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2010), pp. 134–7.

<sup>45</sup> Ruth Roded, "Polygamy and Law in Contemporary Saudi Arabia Gender and Violence in the Middle East Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences", *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 47, no. 1 (2011), pp. 202–6.

polygyny, which is a result of Iranian influence and an overall religious revival. In brief, the rebirth of the old practice of polygyny that began in the Kingdom in the late seventies as part of the emergence of Islamic revivalism across the Middle East has since then spread to the rest of the Muslim societies outside Saudi Arabia.<sup>46</sup>

Yamani's observations on the origins, the emergence of, and factors contributing to polygyny among contemporary Saudis are interesting for further study. Her findings indicate that the practice of polygyny among Saudi society is not simply driven by religious reasons such as following Prophet Muhammad's path (Sunnah) or implementing Qur'anic verses. Yamani has underlined other significant factors contributing to polygyny practice in the Kingdom as political reasons (e.g., the government's support), cultural factors (e.g., to reach a middle or high social status), and pragmatic choices (e.g., the possibility to get economic advantages, find positions, or make an alliance with the ruling family).

Yamani also made another interesting point, arguing that, in pre-Islamic Arabia, polygamous marriage was not practiced by all societies in the Peninsula. At that time, since early Islam, there was a preference for monogamous marriages. She said that, before the advent of Islam, the Quraysh tribe, Muhammad's tribe and one of Makkah's major tribes, did not practice polygyny. Muhammad himself, as depicted earlier, was monogamous for 25 years until the death of Khadija, his first wife. Yamani contends that Muhammad and the early generation of Muslims adopted polygyny from the Jewish community in Madinah after they migrated to this city.

However, I disagree with Yamani's observation and prediction on the growth of polygyny in the Kingdom that tends to overlook the facts and conditions of many unmarried Saudi men and women due to economic hardship in urban areas, the difficulty of finding fine professional jobs, or the high costs of marriage. In contrast to Yamani's observation on the escalation of polygyny as well as Western and non-Saudi public opinions on the widespread practice of polygyny in the Kingdom, I have discovered that the Saudi younger generation does

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<sup>46</sup> Yamani, *Polygamy and Law in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*; Zahia Smail Salhi, "Polygamy and Law in Contemporary Saudi Arabia (review)", *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* (2010).

not favor polygyny, preferring monogamy instead. In the next section, I describe a summary of opinions from my interviewees and informants; all of them are unmarried youth aged between 19 and 25 years.

#### **D. Voices of Saudi Male Youths on Marriage, Monogamy, and Polygyny**

In his 1990's study on the social change in Saudi families, Saeed Hamdan hypothesized that the views on polygyny among many Saudi old and young generations tend to change. He distributed a questionnaire survey among Saudi husbands and wives in Riyadh, representing old and young families, on several family-related issues, including polygamy. Hamdan selected 300 husbands and 300 wives from old families (above 50 years) as well as 300 husbands and 300 wives that represent young families (below 50 years).

The survey findings indicate that 78.7 percent of husbands and 52 percent of wives of old families and 80.4 percent of husbands and 65.3 percent of wives of young families said that polygamy has become less dominant in Saudi society.<sup>47</sup> For him, this decline is mainly because people have become aware that they could not fulfill the stipulations concerning polygyny, as mandated in the Qur'an (QS 4:3) whose full text of the verse was mentioned earlier. In his study, Hamdan highlighted that the social change taking place within the Saudi families is not only on issues around perceptions of polygyny but also on other matters such as the marriage of cousins, the selection process of finding a mate, and the age of marriage, among others.<sup>48</sup>

Hamdan's research findings that go back to some 30 years ago are still consistent and relevant. As stated previously, the findings of my research and fieldwork also indicate that polygyny is not a preferable choice among Saudi male youths (aged between 20 and 30 years) who are not married yet. The findings show that there are a variety of reasons and factors for selecting monogamy if they get married in the future. Examples and expressions of their opinions will be highlighted in the following paragraphs. Since some informants have articulated, more or less, the same views, I have not quoted all of their opinions. I only

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<sup>47</sup> Hamdan, "Social Change in the Saudi Family", pp. 165–6.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 162–6.

underline some major points of view in this section (see also **Table 1**).

One of the important factors, why they chose monogamy, is because this type of marriage is considered to be more reasonable and less complex than polygyny.

Saad Al Duais, for example, said,

“I would choose monogamy since it has a lack of complexity relations besides providing all necessary needs such as having children and better emotional life. For me (and perhaps others), it is much easier to provide support and needs of one wife than multiple ones.”

Even though Al Duais selects monogamy for future marriage plans, he seems to tolerate polygyny in a society where women outnumber men. In such a society, Al Duais said, “it is better and useful if men marry more than one wife at the same time to support and provide economic sources of women and their families.” However, he said, if the men are not able to provide the basic needs such as a stable income and good health care, it is not recommended for polygyny since it will produce an unhealthy environment for their future children to grow”.<sup>49</sup>

Another informant, Alaa Al Jaughir, expressed more or less the same rationales and arguments as those of Al Duais. For him, monogamy is a better choice because of the following reasons. First, having one wife means lesser economic and financial burdens on the part of the husband, besides making it easier to take care of his wife and progeny. “More spouses mean more people to take care of, and this is hard to me,” Al Jaughir said. He maintained that it is difficult and almost impossible to do justice—financially, psychologically, and sexually—with multiple wives. Al Jaughir cited the Qur’an (4:129) saying, “And you cannot do justice between the wives, even though you may wish (to do so).” Injustice can cause disharmony in the family. This verse suggests that the Qur’an itself, Al Jaughir argued, has warned those who want to practice a polygamous marriage since it is difficult to achieve.

The second reason Al Jaughir highlighted is that monogamy will avoid or minimize a wife’s jealousy. This is in sharp contrast with polygyny in which the first wife tends to get jealous and act rudely with the second, third, or fourth wives, causing disputes and chaos in the family. “This is a very common issue here,” he said.

<sup>49</sup> Saad Al Duais, interview (2 Dec 2018).

Alaa Al Jaughir said,

“In brief, although Islam allows polygyny under certain circumstances, monogamy is a safer, easier, and better choice for me. Many problems start arising after a husband decides to have a second, third, or fourth wife. For me, it is tough to spend time equally with some wives, take care of some houses, and support many children. Accordingly, I will not opt for polygynous marriage.”<sup>50</sup>

Table 1 A Brief Summary of Rationales for Choosing Monogamy and Circumventing Polygyny among Saudi Male Youths

| Why Monogamy?  | Why Not Polygyny?   |
|--|---|
| Although polygyny is permitted, Islam and the Qur'an strongly encourage monogamy | Afraid of committing unfairness towards wives (financially, sexually, or (psychologically   |
| More reasonable  | It looks complicated to have multiple wives   |
| The household relationship is less complex                                       | High-cost economy and extravagance ((wastefulness   |
| Wedding cost is less expensive   | Expensive and unaffordable wedding costs  |
| Lighten up economic and financial burdens  | Polygyny has the potential to make jealousy, chaos, and disputes among wives ((and children |
| Easier to take care of wife and children   | Gender bias   |
| To avoid or minimize wife's jealousy, disputes, and chaos in the family          | Difficult to take care of many children and secure a big family                             |
| More meaningful, beneficial, and better suited for families                      | The Qur'an seems to give more support or endorsement to monogamy than polygamous marriage   |
| Couples will improve their trust and loyalty to each other                       | Potential causing divorce   |
| Children can spend more time with their parents                                  | Unfaithful and unjust to women  |

Other reasons some young Saudis have underscored are that monogamy, in contrast to polygyny, is generally more “meaningful” and better suited for families. Within monogamy, “couples will improve their

<sup>50</sup> Alaa Al Jaughary, interview (3 Dec 2018).

trust and loyalty to each other. Besides, children can spend more time with their parents. They are also more likely to be more stable and happier,” Saeed Tahir argued. Moreover, Tahir said, “I would choose monogamy simply because the system is better for children as well as more beneficial for me and my wife in building family, households, and harmonious relationships.” For Tahir, polygyny is unfair and gender-biased since a man can marry multiple women, while a woman cannot marry multiple men. In addition, polygyny, Tahir argued, can create jealousy among wives that, in turn, could ruin their marriage and family. Tahir underscored that disputes often emerge in a polygamous marriage, triggered by jealousy or unfair (unequal) treatment of the husband towards their wives. The disputes could be between the husband and wives, among wives, or among their children.<sup>51</sup>

Some informants would love to have two or more wives, but they confess it is difficult to take care of some wives. Sultan Alshehri, for example, said that, if possible, he wanted to have some wives for several reasons. First, polygyny could make him and his family proud since his children will carry his family name. Second, it could strengthen society since polygyny has the potential to produce many children. Third, having multiple wives will satisfy his needs. Third, polygyny could help reduce the rate of celibacy, i.e., unmarried women, which is high in the Kingdom. However, he admits that he is unable to have multiple wives since it is hard to have and secure a big family, not only economically and financially but also psychologically. “Raising multiple children, caring for multiple wives and children, and giving equal support and amount of finance and love for them are uneasy,” Alshehri said.<sup>52</sup>

Another informant, Abdullah Albadrani, provides three main reasons for his choice of monogamy. First, marriage is not only about sexual relationships between husband and wife but also social and psychological relations in which each could share their life, thoughts, and ideas. In this regard, for him, it is almost impossible to fulfill these ideals if a husband has more than one wife. The second reason Albadrani underscores is that, in polygyny, there is no equality between wives. He stated that “A husband cannot give feelings of love, happiness,

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<sup>51</sup> Saeed Tahir, interview (7 Dec 2018).

<sup>52</sup> Sultan Alsheri, interview (5 Nov 2018).

commitment, or desire equally to all wives. Hence, polygyny can potentially discriminate (or even oppress) one or some of the wives while privileging others.” Third, monogamy tends to be more plausible and practical both economically and financially, especially for those (husbands) who do not have sufficient sources of income.<sup>53</sup>

Unlike Albadrani, Ibrahim Al Thunayyan, another informant, has emphasized the following reasons for his choice of monogamy. First, the chance to be fair with a wife is greater if a husband has one wife as well as children from the same (one) wife. He admitted the difficulty to be fair with some wives and their children. Second, having one wife makes it a husband easier to raise and educate his children properly. Third, management and control of the house and family are easier to achieve if a husband has one wife. Fourth, a person can only truly love one person (wife) at a time in their life.<sup>54</sup>

Moreover, Faisal Almuzaini made a list of reasons, ranging from economic to psychological ones, for marrying one wife in the future. He said that having one wife is “cheaper for wallet and bank account, easier to satisfy the wife, less responsibility and headache, more relaxing, avoiding for being unfair, and more focused and devoted to the family, among others.”

### **E. Social Contexts and Rationales for Monogamy for Young Saudis**

It is obvious that the choice of monogamy among Saudi youths is based on a mixture of religious (theological) and nonreligious factors and rationales (socio-cultural, psychological, and economic). Like the supporters of polygyny, those of monogamy also believe that Islam and the Qur’an have endorsed the practice of monogamy since it is nearly impossible for a husband to do justice with multiple wives. The Qur’anic idea of polygyny, for them, was under strict circumstances and hard conditions such as financial capability (to support all family members—wives and children) and fairness with all wives. They argue that the verse on polygyny in the Qur’an is not an instruction, directive, or compulsion for Muslims (like verses on hajj pilgrimage, fasting in Ramadhan, or praying five times a day) but a matter of choice.

<sup>53</sup> Abdullah Albadrani, interview (10 Oct 2018).

<sup>54</sup> Ibrahim Al Thunayyan, interview (6 Dec 2018)..



Furthermore, they argue that Muhammad himself was monogamous for about 25 years during his marriage with his first wife until her death. The prophet practiced polygyny after the demise of his first wife mainly because he wanted to help and give support to widows (except Fatima, the only virgin girl the prophet married to) and their children of deceased husbands who died in the battlefields to defend Islam and Muslim community from their enemies. Yamani<sup>55</sup> argues that Muhammad's idea of implanting or practicing polygyny was also influenced by the Jewish community in northern Madinah (previously, Yathrib). She saw the polygyny system among Jews as a good mechanism to resolve the issue. Later, Muhammad also encouraged his companions to take wives of the dead husbands.

Besides theological-religious rationales, several non-religious and theological factors have also contributed to the choice of monogamy among unmarried Saudi youths. Many Saudi males cannot afford even to marry one wife, as explained below; how would they opt for polygyny? In other words, polygyny is an unrealistic dream for many Saudis. These non-religious factors include, among others, the high cost of marriage, limited jobs, the increase in educated people, the strict competition for employment, women's emancipation, the upsurge in the divorce rate, and the decline in individual prosperity. As expressed by informants, psychological or emotional factors have also contributed to the monogamy choice such as anxieties or fear for not being able to do justice or fairness—financially, emotionally, or sexually—with multiple wives and children from different wives.

Furthermore, the increase in educated people, both male and female, has also driven Saudis to think twice before practicing polygamous marriage as well as be realistic and rationalistic about marriage practice.<sup>56</sup> In the past, people might think marriage to be a simple practice (e.g., having sexual intercourse, producing children, and composing a household), but now, they tend to calculate its advantages and disadvantages or costs and benefits. As depicted below, a great number of Saudis—both males

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<sup>55</sup> Yamani, *Polygamy and Law in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*.

<sup>56</sup> Sidiqa AllahMorad and Sahel Zreik, "Education in Saudi Arabia", *World Education News & Reviews-WENR* (9 Apr 2020), <https://wenr.wes.org/2020/04/education-in-saudi-arabia>, accessed 20 Apr 2021.

and females—have decided not to get married, preferring to live alone because of a variety of reasons; some of these reasons are highlighted in this section. Moreover, some women are willing to be polygynized by wealthy husbands, while other women propose an unofficial prerequisite to their future husbands if they get married, namely becoming the first and the last wife (meaning that they do not want their husbands to be polygamous).

Expensive wedding cost is also a major factor for Saudi males to delay their marriage. Some informants complained and expressed their concerns about the high cost of the marriage process, including that for dowry, bridewealth, wedding party, and others (e.g., additional gifts for parents of the bride), which many people cannot afford. They also said that parents, particularly fathers, often demanded a certain amount of money for their daughters' dowries, which are beyond the means of ordinary Saudis. To cover the wedding costs, which can reach up to hundreds of thousands of Saudi riyals, the informants said, many Saudis, especially parents of the groom, borrow money from the bank or their family networks. The groom's parents do so because they do not want to be disgraceful in front of the bride's parents.

Such an expensive wedding cost has driven several charity or philanthropy groups and individuals in the Kingdom (e.g., the Charity Society for Helping Youth Get Married or members of the Saudi royal families) to help unmarried male youths realize their dreams of marrying their beloved girls.<sup>57</sup> More specifically, the charities and philanthropies set up to help low-income Saudis with the costs of marriage; this is often cited as one of the reasons why more Saudis are waiting to get married.

In the past, especially since the 1970s, a significant number of Saudi husbands had multiple wives—two, three, or four—because of the growth of wealth and the enormous availability of employment for males, thanks to the oil booms and industrialization, but nowadays, things have changed dramatically. For example, since the last few years, as part of the initiative of the Saudi Vision 2030, women can apply for jobs (and

<sup>57</sup> Razan Baker, "Charity Helps 300 Couples to Get Married This Summer", *Arab News* (26 Jun 2007), <https://www.arabnews.com/node/297159>, accessed 20 Apr 2021; Andrew Hammond, "Young Saudis beat inflation via group weddings", *Reuters* (25 Jun 2008), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-inflation-marriage-idUSL2574330620080625>, accessed 20 Apr 2021.

to some extent, they have privilege over males) in any profession (and compete with men), including engineering, higher education, and security sectors, both public (government) and private sectors; these conditions were absent before. The comeback of women on the job market means, on one hand, the decrease in male opportunity to find a desirable job and, on the other hand, the increase in women's financial autonomy. Having a job means, for women, that they are no longer financially dependent on men (fathers or husbands).

This situation brings another complicated implication on the part of male youths, i.e., difficulty to find proper employment because they have to compete with both male and female applicants. This is why many Saudi male youths do not like the idea of women working in public spheres outside the home—government or private sectors. In the past, they competed with male applicants only, but now the competition is with both sexes.

Unlike in developing countries (Indonesia, for instance) where male youths can still propose marriage even though they do not have a stable job and monthly income, Saudi male youths typically do not want or do not dare to get married until they have a steady job or have sufficient funds. For most, if not all, Saudi men, it is generally considered to be shameful if a wife works outside seeking money to feed the family while husbands stay home becoming stay-at-home husbands and fathers to take care of domestic matters such as cooking, cleaning, child-rearing, and the like.

Unlike the Navajos in which men can play an active role in childcare and other domestic family issues while women look for jobs outside, the Saudis follow the Qur'an, Hadith, and Islamic Law that have imparted or instructed males as being responsible for the economic support and protection of the family. In addition, Saudi society's patriarchal culture and traditional values teach males as being the head of the family. Moreover, within the patriarchal culture and system, females are generally responsible for domestic activities.

The female (wife/mother) job, in the Saudi traditional family culture, is not to seek money outside the house but to allocate or distribute it among the family members, making sure that the money is sufficient to fulfill their needs. My conversations with Saudi male youths show that

they would never plan to get married until finding an occupation that suffices to take care of both the wife and children in the future. Some of them were even pessimistic and afraid of getting married in the future because of employment uncertainty.

Interestingly, although women can have a steady job, they do not have the responsibility or obligation to use or spend their wages (money) on their husbands and children, as per Saudi local customs, traditional family norms, and Islamic law. Certainly, there is no prohibition if they want to use the money to support the family. This is to say that even though a husband might have a wife who works for a company and other institutions, the husband is the head and is responsible for providing economic and financial support to the family members. While males tend to not marry until they find a stable job, females also tend to not marry a jobless man who is dependent on his parents nor a man having a low-income job.

No doubt, jobs are a critical issue in Saudi Arabia nowadays, and elsewhere actually. Due to the new governmental policy concerning women's emancipation in the Kingdom that allows them to work in the public domain, and the influx of Covid-19, the unemployment rate is relatively high. According to the Saudi General Authority for Statistics, the unemployment rate was 14.9 percent in Q3 (the third quarter) of 2020, which decreased from 15.4 percent in Q2 (the second quarter) of that year, compared to 11.8 percent in Q1 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic caused a marked spike in joblessness, which had hovered around the 12.5 percent mark since 2016.

The report also stated that among those without work, 61 percent are under the age of 30 years, and 54 percent have a bachelor's degree. Furthermore, the unemployment rate in 2020 is 7.9 percent among Saudi men, whereas it stands at 30.2 percent for the country's women.<sup>58</sup> Previously, based on a report from the Harvard Kennedy School, the unemployment rate is also strikingly high for Saudi women with a bachelor's degree.<sup>59</sup> However, there are large numbers of both male and

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<sup>58</sup> "Employment rate in Saudi Arabia likely to grow in 2021: Jadwa", *Arab News* (3 Feb 2021), <https://arab.news/gv5r7>, accessed 19 Apr 2021.

<sup>59</sup> *The Labor Market in Saudi Arabia: Background, Areas of Progress, and Insights for the Future*, Evidence for Policy Design Report (Cambridge: Harvard Kennedy School,

female bachelor's degree holders, and a substantial percentage of them are unemployed (about 33.5 percent of women and 7.5 percent of men).

As part of the Saudi Vision 2030 project to diversify the economy and move away from oil reliance, the Saudi Labor Ministry announced a process of "Saudization" in 2016, a policy that would require companies to employ a certain percentage of Saudi workers within their workforce. Before the Saudization policy, foreign workers (expatriates) played a critical role in the Kingdom's economy, making up roughly a third of the country's population of 35 million. However, since the implementation of Saudization, millions of expatriates reportedly left the country. Although many expatriates have left, unemployment is still one of the pressing issues in the Kingdom.

In fact, creating jobs for Saudi Arabia's youthful population is one of the biggest challenges facing the Kingdom as it tries to diversify the economy of the world's largest crude exporter. By 2030, as the Saudi Vision has stated, the Kingdom aims to reduce unemployment among citizens to 7 percent. Nevertheless, as depicted earlier, it hit a record high of 15.4 percent in Q2 and 14.9 percent in Q3 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic and lower oil prices struck all business sectors. During that period, the pandemic "had an impact on the economy that affected the Saudi labor market in terms of labor stability, job loss, and job availability," the statistics authority said.<sup>60</sup>

One of the side effects of the above non-religious factors is the relatively high rate of unmarried people, both men and women, in the Kingdom. A statistical report in 2019 by the Saudi General Authority of Statistics shows that more than five million Saudi men and women, aged 15-65 years, are not married. The report stated that unmarried Saudis consisted of 3,006,480 men (about 73.8 percent) and 2,237,983 women (representing 56 percent).<sup>61</sup>

The percentage of unmarried women is lower than men because  

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2018).

<sup>60</sup> Vivian Nereim, "Saudi Arabia Delays Release of Sensitive Jobless Data Four Times", *Bloomberg.com* (21 Jan 2021), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-21/saudi-arabia-delays-release-of-sensitive-jobless-data-four-times>, accessed 20 Apr 2021.

<sup>61</sup> "Over 5 million Saudis aged 15-65 are single", *Saudigazette* (31 Aug 2019), <http://saudigazette.com.sa/article/575988>, accessed 20 Apr 2021.

some women were perhaps married to polygamous husbands, whereas men were not able to marry because of a variety of factors and reasons described above, ranging from expensive wedding costs to limited job opportunities. The data suggest that, if many Saudi males are unmarried, how can they afford polygyny? Hence, monogamy—if they could get married—is undoubtedly the most reasonable, practical, and pragmatic choice.

## F. Concluding Remarks

Based on the inductive analysis of opinions of contemporary Saudi society, especially the male youth, assessments of questionnaire survey findings, and interpretations of raw textual data on marriage practices in Saudi Arabia, the article concludes that multiple factors, reasons, motives, and rationales have driven Saudi unmarried males, if they can get married, to opt for monogamy. For many Saudis, based on information from my informants, having one wife is the most realistic and reasonable one economically, financially, and psychologically.

This is to say that religious values are not the only factors that influence decision-making processes, including those of marriage, among contemporary Saudis. Other non-religious factors (e.g., financial and economic conditions, efficacy of household management, or psychological deliberations) have also contributed to the decision-making on marriage preferences. Interestingly, for the vast majority of Saudi informants, having one wife can closely fulfill the Qur’anic directive, injunction, and suggestion, namely “If fear for not able to commit fairness to some wives, having one wife is the option.”

Their views certainly contradict those of contemporary Indonesian Salafis who endorse and promote polygamous marriage to achieve the “Qur’anic mandate” and Prophet Muhammad’s practice. The data and research findings presented in this article, thus, debunk the common misperception and misunderstanding about widespread polygyny practice in Saudi Arabia. Contrary to the popular belief, monogamous marriage is a more common practice in Saudi society than polygamous one. Moreover, Saudi youths’ views on marriage presented in this article are a mirror of societal, cultural, and social changes in contemporary Saudi Arabia.

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