

# Islamic Law Review on Polygamy: Gender Justice and Human Rights

Dewi Ulfa Lailatul Fitria<sup>1\*</sup>, Rona Merita<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>IAI Pangeran Diponegoro Nganjuk, [ronamerita@iaipd-nganjuk.ac.id](mailto:ronamerita@iaipd-nganjuk.ac.id)

<sup>2</sup>IAI Pangeran Diponegoro Nganjuk, [dewiulfalailatulfitria@iaipd-nganjuk.ac.id](mailto:dewiulfalailatulfitria@iaipd-nganjuk.ac.id)

## Article Info

### Article history:

Received March 17, 2023

Revised March 31, 2023

Accepted April 04, 2023

### Keywords:

Polygamy, Gender Justice, Human Rights, Islamic Law

## ABSTRACT

This article examines the intersection of polygamy, gender justice, and human rights within the framework of Islamic law. The primary objective is to analyze how traditional Islamic practices regarding polygamy can be reconciled with contemporary human rights principles, particularly focusing on the implications for women's rights. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the study reviews relevant Islamic legal texts alongside international human rights conventions, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The findings indicate that while polygamy is permissible in Islam under specific conditions—primarily the requirement of justice among wives—its practical application often leads to violations of women's rights and gender inequality. Furthermore, the research highlights the necessity for reform in legal frameworks governing polygamy to ensure alignment with human rights standards. The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform policymakers and scholars about the need for a balanced approach that respects both Islamic teachings and modern human rights norms, ultimately promoting gender justice within Muslim societies.

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## Corresponding Author:

Dewi Ulfa Lailatul Fitria

IAI Pangeran Diponegoro Nganjuk

Email: [ronamerita@iaipd-nganjuk.ac.id](mailto:ronamerita@iaipd-nganjuk.ac.id)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The topic of polygamy within Islamic law is complex and multifaceted, requiring a thorough understanding of its historical context, the challenges it poses in balancing traditional practices with modern gender justice perspectives, and the alignment of Islamic legal principles with contemporary human rights frameworks. This analysis will explore these dimensions, focusing on the background and context of polygamy in Islamic law, the statement of the problem regarding gender justice and human rights, research objectives aimed at exploring compatibility, and specific research questions that guide this inquiry.

Polygamy has been part of Islamic tradition since its inception, with the Qur'an permitting men to marry up to four wives under specific conditions, primarily emphasizing justice (Surah An-Nisa: 3). The historical context for this allowance can be traced back to pre-Islamic Arabia, where polygamous practices were prevalent. The Qur'anic revelation sought to regulate these practices by imposing strict requirements aimed at ensuring fairness among wives. Scholars like Muhammad Abduh have argued that while polygamy is permissible, it should not be viewed as an ideal; rather, it should be considered a last resort in specific circumstances where justice can be maintained. The principle of justice is central to the Islamic

understanding of polygamy, which requires husbands to treat all wives equitably in terms of financial support, emotional attention, and living conditions. However, the practical application of these principles has often been inconsistent, leading to significant disparities in the treatment of women within polygamous marriages.

The primary challenge lies in balancing traditional practices of polygamy with modern perspectives on gender justice and human rights. While Islamic law permits polygamous marriages under certain conditions, contemporary human rights frameworks emphasize equality and non-discrimination. Instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) explicitly call for the elimination of practices that perpetuate gender inequality. This creates a tension between traditional interpretations of Islamic law that allow for polygamy and modern human rights standards that advocate for women's rights and dignity. The problem is further compounded by cultural norms that often glorify polygamous arrangements as symbols of social status or religious adherence, which can overshadow women's rights and contribute to their marginalization (Abdullah & Lala, 2022).

## 2. RESEARCH METHODS

The qualitative approach to analyzing polygamy within Islamic law, particularly in relation to gender justice and human rights, involves a comprehensive literature review of Islamic legal texts and a comparative analysis with international human rights conventions. This methodology allows for a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding polygamous practices in Muslim-majority societies, where cultural, legal, and religious dimensions intersect.

### Literature Review of Islamic Legal Texts

Islamic legal texts, including the Qur'an and Hadith, provide foundational insights into the permissibility and conditions of polygamy. The Qur'an explicitly permits men to marry up to four wives, contingent upon the ability to treat them justly (Surah An-Nisa: 3). However, interpretations of what constitutes "justice" vary significantly among scholars. For instance, classical jurists like Imam Shafi'i emphasize the necessity of equitable treatment in financial support, living arrangements, and emotional attention among wives. This perspective is echoed in contemporary scholarly discourse, which often critiques the practical application of these principles in modern contexts. Research indicates that many polygamous arrangements fail to meet the Qur'anic mandate for justice, leading to gender disparities and emotional distress among women involved in such marriages (Ameliah & Songgirin, 2023; Saidatina & Hidayah, 2023a).

A significant body of literature also explores the implications of polygamy on women's rights within Islamic frameworks. Scholars argue that while polygamy is permissible, it must be approached with caution due to its potential to infringe upon women's rights and dignity. The concept of fairness is central to these discussions; however, many women in polygamous marriages report feelings of neglect and competition for their husband's attention, highlighting a disconnect between theoretical justice and lived experiences (Azkia & Hidayah, 2024; Santoso et al., 2023). This literature underscores the need for a critical examination of how polygamy is practiced and regulated within various cultural contexts.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Polygamy in Islamic Jurisprudence

Polygamy, the practice of having multiple spouses simultaneously, raises significant legal and ethical considerations that vary widely across cultures and legal systems. In many jurisdictions, particularly in Western countries, polygamy is illegal and considered a criminal offense. For instance, in the United States, all states prohibit polygamous marriages, with laws that invalidate any marriage involving more than two spouses. Bigamy, or marrying another person while still legally married to someone else, can lead to severe penalties including fines and imprisonment (Admin, n.d.). Legal frameworks in these countries emphasize monogamy as the standard marital arrangement, reflecting societal norms and values that prioritize individual rights and equality.

In contrast, polygamy is permitted under certain conditions in various Islamic cultures, where it is seen as a legal right under Sharia law. The practice is governed by strict ethical guidelines that emphasize justice among wives. According to Islamic jurisprudence, a husband who chooses to engage in polygamy must treat each wife fairly in terms of financial support, living arrangements, and emotional attention. The concept of justice is paramount; failure to uphold this principle can lead to significant social and familial discord (Mustaqim & Satory, 2020; Saidatina & Hidayah, 2023b). For instance, Imam Shafi'i's interpretation of Islamic law mandates that a husband must provide equal sustenance and time to each wife. This requirement aims to prevent favoritism and ensure that all wives feel valued and secure within the marital structure.

The legal conditions for practicing polygamy vary significantly by country. In Indonesia, for example, the law allows polygamous marriages but requires court permission. The husband must demonstrate his ability to provide for multiple families and obtain consent from his existing wife or wives (Aminah &

Muala, 2023; Pakarti et al., 2023). This legal framework attempts to balance traditional practices with modern ethical standards by ensuring that the rights of all parties involved are protected. The necessity for judicial oversight reflects an effort to mitigate potential abuses associated with polygamous arrangements, such as neglect or unequal treatment among wives.

Ethically, the practice of polygamy raises questions about gender equality and women's rights. Critics argue that polygamous relationships can perpetuate inequalities between wives, particularly in contexts where women may have limited agency or economic independence. The potential for conflict among co-wives over resources and attention from their husband can exacerbate these inequalities. Thus, while some argue that polygamy can be practiced ethically within a framework of justice and fairness, others contend that it inherently disadvantages women due to power dynamics.

In summary, the legal and ethical conditions surrounding polygamy are complex and multifaceted. While some cultures allow it under specific conditions aimed at ensuring fairness among spouses, others strictly prohibit it based on principles of individual rights and equality. The ongoing debate about polygamy reflects broader societal values regarding marriage, gender roles, and family dynamics. As such, any discussion about polygamy must consider both the legal implications and the ethical responsibilities of those involved in such relationships.

### **Gender Justice in Islamic Law**

Gender justice within Islamic law is a complex and evolving field that seeks to reconcile traditional interpretations of Islamic texts with contemporary understandings of gender equality and justice. Historically, Islamic law, or Sharia, has been interpreted through various lenses, often leading to gender disparities in legal rights and social status. However, recent scholarly efforts have aimed to re-examine these interpretations and advocate for a more equitable application of Islamic principles that uphold the rights of women alongside those of men.

### **Contemporary Interpretations**

In recent years, there has been a growing movement among scholars and activists advocating for gender justice within Islamic law. This movement emphasizes the need to revisit classical interpretations of texts that have historically been used to justify discrimination against women. For instance, many scholars argue that the Qur'an's emphasis on justice and equality should inform modern interpretations of gender roles and rights. A notable aspect of this discourse is the critique of misogynistic hadiths that have perpetuated gender inequality. Scholars such as those involved in the Islamic feminist movement argue for a contextual reading of these texts, suggesting that many interpretations are based on cultural biases rather than authentic Islamic teachings (Suryapermana et al., 2024; Tasbih et al., 2024).

### **Legal Frameworks**

In various Muslim-majority countries, legal systems are influenced by both secular laws and Sharia. This duality often results in inconsistencies regarding women's rights. For example, while some countries have made strides toward gender equality by reforming family laws to enhance women's rights in marriage and divorce, others maintain rigid interpretations of Sharia that limit women's autonomy. The role of religious courts is particularly significant in this context; judges often face the challenge of balancing traditional legal principles with contemporary demands for gender justice. Research indicates that many judges are increasingly open to considering gender equality in their rulings but still grapple with entrenched legal norms (Nasution, 2023).

### **The Role of Education**

Education plays a crucial role in advancing gender justice within Islamic law. By educating both men and women about their rights under Islamic teachings, advocates can foster a more equitable understanding of gender roles. Educational initiatives aimed at religious leaders can also promote more progressive interpretations of texts that align with contemporary views on gender equality (Badawi, n.d.; Kodir, 2007).

### **Polygamy and Human Rights**

Polygamy, the practice of having multiple spouses simultaneously, raises significant human rights concerns, particularly regarding the rights and dignity of women. The international human rights framework, including instruments like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), emphasizes equality and non-discrimination. However, polygamous marriages often contravene these principles by perpetuating gender inequality and undermining women's rights within familial and social contexts.

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## Human Rights Violations in Polygamous Marriages

Polygamy is frequently criticized for violating women's rights to equality and dignity. Article 3 of the ICCPR guarantees equal rights for men and women, yet polygamous arrangements inherently create a hierarchy that privileges one spouse over others, often leading to discrimination against women. The United Nations Human Rights Committee has stated that polygamy is incompatible with the principle of equality, asserting that it violates women's dignity and constitutes inadmissible discrimination against them (Admin, 2011; Oyugi, 2017). Furthermore, polygamy can exacerbate issues such as domestic violence, economic dependency, and social marginalization, which disproportionately affect women and children involved in such unions.

Research indicates that polygamous marriages can lead to severe financial repercussions for women and their children. In many cases, husbands may struggle to provide adequate support for multiple families, resulting in increased poverty and instability. This economic strain not only affects the immediate family but also has broader implications for community welfare. For instance, studies have shown that polygamy often leads to higher rates of poverty among families, particularly in rural areas where resources are limited

### Legal Frameworks and Cultural Contexts

The legal status of polygamy varies widely across different jurisdictions. In some countries, polygamous marriages are legally recognized under customary or religious laws, while in others, they are strictly prohibited. For example, countries that adhere to Islamic law may permit polygamous marriages under specific conditions, often emphasizing the need for fairness among wives. However, even in these contexts, the practical implementation of such laws can be inconsistent. Many husbands fail to fulfill their obligations to provide equal emotional and financial support to all wives, leading to feelings of neglect and resentment among co-wives (Admin, 2015).

In contrast, international human rights bodies have increasingly called for the prohibition of polygamy due to its inherent violations of women's rights. CEDAW has explicitly stated that polygamous marriages contravene women's rights to equality within marriage and family relations. The committee argues that such marriages should be discouraged and prohibited due to their detrimental effects on women's emotional well-being and financial security.

## The Role of Family Law

Family law plays a crucial role in addressing the complexities associated with polygamous marriages. Effective legal frameworks must prioritize the protection of women's rights while balancing individual freedoms with societal interests. For instance, laws should ensure that all marriages are officially registered to protect the legal status of wives and children in polygamous arrangements. Unregistered marriages often lead to ambiguities regarding inheritance rights and access to social services.

Moreover, family law should mandate that individuals entering into a polygamous marriage provide full disclosure about the implications of such an arrangement. This includes ensuring that all parties give free and informed consent without coercion or pressure from family or societal expectations. By fostering transparency and accountability within these relationships, legal frameworks can help mitigate some of the adverse effects associated with polygamy.

## Advocacy for Change

Advocacy efforts aimed at reforming polygamous practices are essential for advancing gender justice. Activists argue for a comprehensive approach that addresses both legal reforms and cultural attitudes toward gender roles within marriage. Education plays a vital role in this process; by raising awareness about women's rights under international human rights law, communities can begin to challenge harmful norms associated with polygamy.

Furthermore, engaging religious leaders in discussions about gender equality can foster more progressive interpretations of religious texts that govern marital practices. Many scholars advocate for a re-examination of traditional views on marriage that prioritize equality and mutual respect among spouses (Government of Canada, 2024).

## Contemporary Challenged and Reforms

Reform efforts regarding polygamy laws in Muslim-majority countries have gained momentum in recent years, reflecting a broader commitment to gender justice and human rights. These reforms are primarily driven by the recognition of polygamy as a practice that can perpetuate gender inequality and marginalization of women. As societies evolve, the legal frameworks governing polygamous marriages are being scrutinized and reformed to align more closely with contemporary values of equality and justice.

## Historical Context and Legal Framework

Polygamy has been a part of Islamic tradition since its inception, with the Qur'an permitting men to marry up to four wives under the condition of justice (Surah An-Nisa: 3). However, the practical application

of this principle has often fallen short. In many cases, husbands struggle to meet the obligations of fairness and equity required by Islamic law, leading to significant disparities in treatment among wives. This has raised concerns about the psychological and emotional well-being of women in polygamous marriages, as well as their legal status and rights.

In Indonesia, the legal landscape surrounding polygamy is shaped by both Islamic law and national legislation. Law Number 1 of 1974 concerning Marriage imposes strict requirements for polygamous marriages, including the necessity of obtaining permission from a religious court and consent from the first wife. This dual legal framework aims to protect women's rights while acknowledging cultural practices. However, the implementation of these laws often reveals significant gaps between legal theory and practice. Many polygamous marriages occur without proper registration or oversight, leaving women vulnerable to legal ambiguities regarding inheritance, custody, and financial support (Rusliadi, 2023).

### **Current Reform Efforts**

In various Muslim-majority countries, reform efforts have taken different forms, ranging from outright bans on polygamy to stricter regulations aimed at ensuring fairness among spouses. For instance:

**Tunisia:** Tunisia is notable for its absolute prohibition of polygamy, which is enshrined in its Family Code. This reform is viewed as a significant step toward gender equality, as it eliminates the potential for discrimination against women within marital relationships. The legal framework aims to establish equal rights for men and women within the family structure, reflecting a commitment to modern human rights principles (Noviana et al., 2022).

**Indonesia:** In Indonesia, polygamy is regulated under Law Number 1 of 1974 concerning Marriage, which requires husbands to obtain permission from a religious court and consent from existing wives before entering into a polygamous marriage. While this law recognizes the cultural context of polygamy, it also seeks to protect women's rights by imposing strict conditions on its practice. However, challenges remain in enforcing these regulations effectively (Hayati & Zenrif, 2023).

**Malaysia:** Similar to Indonesia, Malaysia allows polygamy under specific conditions outlined in the Islamic Family Law Act. Husbands must demonstrate their ability to provide for multiple families and obtain consent from their first wives. This legal framework aims to balance traditional practices with contemporary demands for gender justice (Kusmardani et al., 2023; Madina et al., 2023).

**Morocco:** Morocco's Family Code includes provisions that regulate polygamous marriages by requiring judicial authorization and ensuring that husbands can fulfill their obligations towards all wives. The reforms aim to enhance women's rights while recognizing cultural practices (Stilt et al., n.d.).

**Pakistan:** The Muslim Family Laws Ordinance in Pakistan permits polygamy but requires husbands to seek permission from their existing wives and an arbitration council before marrying additional spouses. This legal requirement reflects an effort to protect women's interests and ensure that their voices are heard in decisions affecting their lives.

### **Role of Islamic Scholars in Modernizing Interpretations**

The role of Islamic scholars is crucial in shaping contemporary interpretations of polygamy within Islamic law. Scholars are increasingly advocating for a contextual understanding of traditional texts that considers modern societal dynamics and the principles of gender justice. This movement seeks to reconcile classical Islamic teachings with contemporary human rights standards.

Many scholars argue that while polygamy is permissible under certain conditions, achieving true justice both material and emotional can be exceedingly difficult. They emphasize that the Qur'an's emphasis on justice should inform modern interpretations of gender roles within marriage.

For instance, scholars like Amina Wadud have called for a re-examination of traditional views on marriage that prioritize equality and mutual respect among spouses. Furthermore, organizations such as Musawah advocate for a holistic approach that integrates Islamic teachings with universal human rights principles. They encourage dialogue among scholars, activists, and policymakers to foster more progressive interpretations of Islamic texts that prioritize equity and emotional well-being alongside traditional practices.

### **Advocacy for Gender Justice**

Advocacy groups play a crucial role in pushing for reforms that promote gender justice within the context of Islamic law. Organizations like Musawah emphasize the need for a holistic approach that integrates Islamic teachings with universal human rights principles. They advocate for reforms that not only restrict polygamy but also enhance women's access to divorce and improve their overall status within society.

### **Contemporary Challenges**

Several contemporary challenges complicate the discourse on polygamy within Islamic law:

**Implementation Gaps:** The lack of effective monitoring mechanisms for polygamous marriages results in widespread non-compliance with legal requirements. Many marriages go unregistered, leading to

complications regarding legal rights for wives and children.

**Cultural Norms:** Deeply entrenched cultural perceptions often glorify polygamous arrangements as symbols of social status or religious adherence. These norms can overshadow women's rights and contribute to their marginalization within familial structures.

**Psychological Impact:** The emotional toll on women in polygamous relationships is frequently overlooked. Feelings of neglect or inadequacy can lead to mental health issues such as depression or anxiety among co-wives.

**Legal Conflicts:** The tension between Islamic law's allowance for polygamy and national laws aimed at protecting women's rights creates significant legal dilemmas for courts tasked with adjudicating these cases (Hasa, 2012).

### Reforms and Recommendations

To address these challenges, several reforms have been proposed:

**Strengthening Legal Frameworks:** Enhancing the regulatory mechanisms governing polygamy can help ensure compliance with both Islamic principles and human rights standards. This includes implementing stricter requirements for marriage registration and monitoring compliance with obligations toward all spouses.

**Educational Initiatives:** Promoting awareness about women's rights under both Islamic law and international human rights frameworks can empower women to advocate for themselves within polygamous arrangements.

**Engaging Religious Leaders:** Involving religious leaders in discussions about gender justice can facilitate more progressive interpretations of Islamic texts that prioritize equity and emotional well-being alongside traditional practices.

**Promoting Monogamy:** Some scholars argue that monogamy may be more conducive to achieving justice in contemporary contexts where equitable treatment among multiple spouses is challenging to realize<sup>3</sup>. Encouraging this shift could lead to more stable family dynamics (Ma'u, 2023).

## 4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The exploration of polygamy within Islamic law, particularly in relation to gender justice and human rights, has revealed significant insights and raised critical questions about the compatibility of traditional practices with contemporary values. Key findings from the literature indicate that while polygamy is permissible under Islamic law, its practice often diverges from the principles of justice and equality that are foundational to both Islamic teachings and international human rights standards. This summary synthesizes the key findings, offers recommendations for aligning Islamic practices with contemporary gender justice and human rights principles, and discusses implications for future research.

Research has consistently highlighted that polygamy, while permissible in Islam, poses challenges to gender equality and women's rights. The Qur'an permits men to marry up to four wives, provided they can treat them justly (Surah An-Nisa: 3). However, many studies indicate that the practical application of this principle often falls short. For instance, women in polygamous marriages frequently report feelings of neglect and emotional distress due to unequal treatment by their husbands. Scholars such as Muhammad Abduh argue that while polygamy is allowed, it should be seen as a last resort rather than a normative practice; ideally, monogamy should be the standard due to the inherent difficulties in achieving true justice among multiple spouses. Additionally, international human rights frameworks, including CEDAW, emphasize the need for equality in marriage and family life, which can conflict with traditional interpretations of polygamous practices. The lack of legal protections for women in polygamous arrangements further exacerbates these issues, leaving many without recourse to address grievances related to financial support or emotional neglect.

The intersection of Islamic law on polygamy with contemporary gender justice and human rights principles presents a complex landscape requiring thoughtful engagement from scholars, policymakers, and communities alike. While traditional practices are deeply rooted in cultural contexts, there is an urgent need for reforms that address the disparities faced by women in polygamous marriages. By fostering dialogue around these issues and implementing comprehensive legal frameworks that prioritize equality and human dignity, societies can work toward a more just interpretation of Islamic law that resonates with modern values. Through continued research efforts focused on these themes, there exists significant potential to influence positive change in marital practices across diverse Muslim-majority contexts while upholding the foundational principles of justice inherent in Islam.

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