

Study suggests not all polygynous marriage is harmful to women or children

October 27 2015, by Bob Yirka



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(Phys.org)—A study conducted by a team of researchers from the U.K., Tanzania and the U.S. has found an example of polygynous marriage that does not appear to be harmful to women or children. In their paper published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, the researchers outline their study of people living in villages in Tanzania, and why they believe organizations such as the UN need to modify their stance on the practice to better take account of cultural practices.

Polygyny is a term used to refer to [marriage](#) systems where males can have more than one wife, while polygamy refers to the actual practice of it. In this new study, the researchers looked into the question of whether a polygynous marriage is in fact harmful to [women](#) or children as has been assumed by many in the international community. They looked at 3,500 households in villages in Tanzania, noting the occurrences of polygynous marriage versus [monogamous marriage](#) and the standard of living for those women and children.

In looking at their data, they found that first wives—women who were the first to marry a man with several wives, tended to have better nutrition as did their children, than women in monogamous marriages and their children. Later wives and their children fared on average as well as monogamous wives and their children, but not as well as first wives. This, the team claims, shows that not all instances of polygynous marriage are harmful to women or children—it shows that in some cases, it can actually be a practice that women can use to better their lives and that of their children. It is a matter of wealth and the rules that govern a society—if women cannot own land or other resources, for example, or take a job, as was the case in the Tanzanian villages, they will likely do better in life if they are able to attract and marry a man with some degree of wealth, which in some cases may mean, a man with multiple [wives](#).

This means, the team adds, that agencies such as the UN need to be more culturally sensitive when describing polygynous marriage and not just assume that it is bad for all women and [children](#) no matter what and use that argument to try to curtail the practice.

More information: David W. Lawson et al. No evidence that polygynous marriage is a harmful cultural practice in northern Tanzania, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2015). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1507151112](#)

Abstract

Polygyny is cross-culturally common and a topic of considerable academic and policy interest, often deemed a harmful cultural practice serving the interests of men contrary to those of women and children. Supporting this view, large-scale studies of national African demographic surveys consistently demonstrate that poor child health outcomes are concentrated in polygynous households. Negative population-level associations between polygyny and well-being have also been reported, consistent with the hypothesis that modern transitions to socially imposed monogamy are driven by cultural group selection. We challenge the consensus view that polygyny is harmful, drawing on multilevel data from 56 ethnically diverse Tanzanian villages. We first demonstrate the vulnerability of aggregated data to confounding between ecological and individual determinants of health; while across villages polygyny is associated with poor child health and low food security, such relationships are absent or reversed within villages, particularly when children and fathers are coresident. We then provide data indicating that the costs of sharing a husband are offset by greater wealth (land and livestock) of polygynous households. These results are consistent with models of polygyny based on female choice. Finally, we show that village-level negative associations between polygyny prevalence, food security, and child health are fully accounted for by underlying differences in ecological vulnerability (rainfall) and socioeconomic marginalization (access to education). We highlight the need for improved, culturally sensitive measurement tools and appropriate scales of analysis in studies of polygyny and other purportedly harmful practices and discuss the relevance of our results to theoretical accounts of marriage and contemporary population policy.

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