

Islam and Polygamy

Islam allows polygamy and permits men, under specific circumstances, to have at most four wives at any given time.

Polygamy was customary before Islam and was not abrogated with the coming of Islam; instead, Islam has corrected and set various conditions for the practice. The principle was permitted, but polygamy was limited to four wives.

In authorizing polygamy, Islam does not have the intention of siding with men and encouraging them to form harems or overindulge in sexual desires and debauchery or to overlook the rights of women and oppress them. Rather, Islam's aim is to uphold a range of women's natural rights—the right to marriage, forming a family, and having and rearing legitimate children. Of course, the rights of men have also been kept in mind. The permitting of polygamy, while observing prescribed conditions, is a social necessity and in the ultimate interests of both women and men and in order to elucidate this matter, the following two premises are indicated.

First premise: Even though female births are not more than that of males, statistics show that the number of women who are available for marriage is often more than men. There are two reasons for this:

First, the fatalities of men, especially young men, exceed fatalities of girls and women. This becomes evident by referring to the casualties of incidents such as war, falling from heights, getting buried under debris, drowning, mine and industry mortalities, car accidents, work related accidents, etc. Because of these accidents, which are not few, the equilibrium between men and women is lost and the ratio of women to men increases. This is evident in the human casualties of recent wars, such as the wars of Iraq and Iran, America and Iraq, Russia and Afghanistan and their internal wars, Serbia and Bosnia, and other wars and acts of aggression that occur all over the globe. The human death toll in these battles is monstrously high and the majority of deaths concerns men and youths that either had not married or had married recently before their demise. Now consider the increase of women over men as a result of these wars.

Second, some scientists hold that women's resistance to diseases is higher than that of men. Studies of the deaths of children, adolescents, and young adults affirm this theory. The average lifespan of women is longer than men. Statistics show a higher rate of widowed women than widower men.

Thus, the number of single women who want and need to marry is higher than the number of single men who need and desire marriage. We all have seen many widowed women who wish to remarry a desirable man but cannot due to the circumstances. On the other hand, there are not many unmarried men who wish to marry that cannot find a woman willing to marry.

Second premise: One of the natural rights of all human beings is the right to marriage and formation of a family; just as humans have the right to have jobs, homes, health and hygiene, food, and clothes, they also have the right to marriage. All humans, both males and females, have the right to marry, enjoy familial peace and love, develop lasting emotional attachments, and bring forth and raise legitimate children. As human beings, women have this right. Thus, social laws must be regulated in such a manner that this natural right is readily available to all.

In short, in every society there are a large number of unmarried women who need and desire to marry and if they do not, they may be driven to deviation and corruption. The number of single men who are willing to marry widows is not high enough to appease the requirements of every society, due to the fact that young men usually prefer to marry previously unmarried women, who are already more than enough to satisfy their numbers. On this account, what must widows who wish to remarry do? In this case, the society must either accede to sexual freedom, corruption, and unrestraint, such as has been accepted in the West or, as in Islam, must follow a polygamous system.

In order to resolve this problem to the advantage of widowed women, who wish to marry and perhaps start a family, and prevent social corruption and sexual deviations, Islam has allowed polygamy.

Another justification for polygamy is sterility or incapacity of a man's spouse. In the event that a woman is completely sterile or pregnancy is harmful to her due to an incurable illness, and her husband feels the need for a child, both reason and conscience give assent to his right to remarry.

Additionally, if one's wife is ill and cannot satiate the sexual needs of her husband, remarrying becomes a necessity for the man. In order to resolve this problem, the man either has to divorce his first wife or marry again without divorcing her. The second option is to the advantage of the first wife because she does not become destitute and alone in her illness.

Nevertheless, it must be stressed that in light of the fact that the most important benefit of marriage is familial love, tranquility, and affection, monogamy is far preferable to polygamy. Moreover, Islam does not encourage men to remarry to appease their concupiscence and to sacrifice familial love and peace for evanescent pleasure. The reason that Islam acquiesces to polygamy is due to a social necessity and in order to protect the rights of widowed women and women who need to marry.

Conditions of time, place, societies, and personal resources and facilities differ regarding this issue. If there is no personal or social necessity for polygamy, monogamy is preferable and if polygamy is required in a society or for some persons, women and men must cooperate in attaining this goal. A man who intends to remarry for one of these reasons must adhere to his financial and physical means and in the event that he does not have the means to manage two households, he must forego remarriage. Then, if he has the means, he must discuss the issue with his wife and prove to her the necessity for remarriage, assure her that he will observe justice and equality among his wives, and obtain her consent in any fair manner possible.

The duty of such a wife is self-sacrifice in order to ensure personal and social necessities; she must set aside harsh emotions, mind the predicament and needs of her husband or widowed women, and above all else, she must think of God's satisfaction and thus, allow her husband, his legitimate request.

If remarriage results through mutual consent of husband and wife, it will be far less problematic for everyone involved.

Conditions for Polygamy

Islam tolerates polygamy; however, it has placed various conditions for it that, in practice, are very difficult to observe. These are as follows:

1. Possession of sufficient financial resources to provide all expenses of each family
2. Physical prowess for completely satisfying the sexual desires of each wife
3. Observance of complete justice and equality among each family in every way without any favoritism

Allah, the Almighty has declared in the Quran:

...فَأَنْكِحُوا مَا طَابَ لَكُمْ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ مَثْنَى وَثُلَاثَ وَرُبَاعَ فَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ أَلَّا تَعْدِلُوا فَوَاحِدَةً...

"...then marry [other] women, who seem virtuous to you, two or three or four; and if you fear that you cannot do them justice, then one [only]..."¹

This verse gives permission for polygamy on the condition that there is no likelihood of refraining to observe fairness and justice, which is rather unfeasible and very hard to attain.

A man who has more than one wife is obligated to observe equality, justice, and fairness among his wives in the amount, type, and quality of *nafaqah*, sexual enjoyment and intercourse, and even in mannerism. It is the duty of polygamous men to behave comparably in all events, even if their wives are different in age, beauty, character, social status, and other virtues and perfections.

It is clear that completely adhering to justice and fairness is quite challenging and few men can be sure about their ability to shoulder such heavy responsibilities whereas the Quran makes it quite clear that if they doubt their ability to behave equally and justly with their wives, they should suffice themselves with one wife.

Consequently, polygamy in Islam is a very onerous and high-liability undertaking, something that most men are not competent enough to accomplish.

[1.](#) – Surah Nisa' 4:3.

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