

# TAMING ISLAM'S POLYGyny LAW Revealing Male Sexual Desire in Indonesia's Polygyny Practices

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# 1 TAMING ISLAM'S POLYGyny LAW Revealing Male Sexual Desire in Indonesia's Polygyny Practices<sup>1</sup>

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1

**Abstract:** As of current, polygamy in terms of polygyny in Islamic law remains to be a debated topic. One of the reasons for the debate is that polygyny is viewed through the lens of men. Research on polygyny viewed from the male sexual perspective is still extremely rare. The research data were gathered through in-depth interviews with four polygyny practitioners to discover the most subtle, private, confidential, and exclusive aspects of polygyny's sexual practice. The study found that the sexual lust on the part of the male (husband) is a form of sexual sublimation and subtle sexuality in the practice of polygyny. Additionally, the findings indicate that the sexual lust is practice for recreational purposes. The research findings may have implications on the emergence of new understandings on the practice of polygyny. Nevertheless, the study raises an intriguing question for future research: why are women willing to be sexually objectified by polygynist men?

**Keywords:** Islamic law, male sexuality, polygamy, subtle sexuality

## Introduction

According to the Qur'an *sūrat al-Nisā'* verse 3, it is stated that a man is permitted to have two, three, or four wives. Polygyny is a form of polygamy, in which a husband has multiple wives. However, in the the Qur'an *sūrat al-Nisā'* verse 24, Islam forbids wives to have multiple husbands (polyandry). As a result, the West views Islam as a religion

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<sup>1</sup> The writers would like to convey our gratitude to all the source persons in this study for their willingness to participate in the interview and open up about their private sexual and family life.

that sexually abuses and enslaves women. Although, Western culture has historically denied women equality in social and political life, Islam's family law, which permits polygamy, continues to be viewed as akin to female slavery.<sup>2</sup>

As of today, discussions on polygyny in Islamic law, which is viewed as a form of harassment and enslavement of women, still continue. Men and women continue to engage <sup>31</sup> polemics over polygyny law in both public and private spaces.<sup>3</sup> One of the rarely discussed points of contention is husband's use of male sexual power<sup>4</sup> perspective over women as their wife in polygyny. Male sexual power is frequently invoked by men desiring more than one wife, on the grounds that a single woman is incapable of satisfying their sexual impulses. Although this is difficult subject to discuss because the intimate relationship between husband and wife is private one that occurs in private space, sexual impulses can move uncontrollably, prompting the immediate fulfillment of these urges. Polygyny is a solution that is considered permissible under sharia law. Hence, the law on polygyny may be driven by the wildness of sexual desire. Consequently, it is necessary to tame such sexual desire.

The greater intensity of men's sexual drive compared to that of women, which is used to justify polygyny, is also quite controversial. The reason for this statement is that women have become a mere place

21

<sup>2</sup> Haideh Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis* (London: Zed Books, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Nina Nurmila and Linda Rae Bennett, "The Sexual Politics of Polygamy in Indonesian Marriage," Linda Rae Bennett and Sharyn Graham Davies (eds), *Sex and Sexualities in Contemporary Indonesia: Sexual Politics, Health, Diversity and Representations* (London and New York: Routledge 2015), pp 60-87. Also see Sonja van Wichelen, "Polygamy Talk and the Politics of Feminism: Contestations Over Masculinity in a New Muslim Indonesia," *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 11, 1 (2009), pp. 173-188; Nina Nurmila, "Negotiating Polygamy in Indonesia: Between Islamic Discourse and Women's Lived Experiences," Susan Blackburn, Bianca J. Smith, and Siti Syamsiyatun (eds), *Indonesian Islam in a New Era: How Women Negotiate Their Muslim Identities* (Australia: Monash University Press, 2008) pp. 23-45; Muhammad Latif Fauzi, "Actors and Norms In An Islamic Marriage: A Study of Madura Community in Rural Eastern East Java," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 13, 2 (2019): pp. 297-325; Nina Nurmila, *Women, Islam and Everyday life: Renegotiating Polygamy in Indonesia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009); Suzanne Brenner, "Democracy, Polygamy, and Women in Post-Reformasi Indonesia," *Social Analysis*, 50, 1 (2006), pp. 164-170.

<sup>4</sup> For example see Fransiska Widyawati, "When Love And Faith Collide: Womens Conversion to Husbands Religion in Flores," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 14, 2 (2020).

for discharging male's sexual lust.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, this argument does not always hold water, since as women, like men, have immense sexual urges. Taking rape as an example, it is not exclusively men who are found guilty in rape cases; women are frequently<sup>23</sup> accused as being the guilty party as well. According to the Qur'an, men and women have similar sexual needs and that sex should be available for their enjoyment, not for recreation.<sup>6</sup> The Quranic story of Zulaikha's attempt to seduce the Prophet Yusuf, surah Yusuf verse 23, is one of the examples where women exhibit strong sexual impulses.

Understanding polygyny from the perspective of the husbands (men), who are permitted to have multiple wife's, places polygyny as an uninhibited practice and arena for men to express their sexual impulses. This issue is then confronted against the Qur'an *sūrat al-Nisā'* verse 3, as the cited text and legal basis for permitting polygamy. This article discusses the practice of polygyny from the standpoint of male sexual desire<sup>26</sup>. Specifically, the study determined<sup>26</sup> whether polygyny is practiced as a result of men's sexual desires or as a result of men's obedience to religious orders that permit polygyny, as written in the Qur'an *sūrat al-Nisā'* verse 3. Accordingly, the polygyny law serves as a forum for legitimizing the expression of male sexual desires in a manner permissible under sharia. To address the issue, this study conducted in-depth interviews to four men who are polygynous. Additionally, the study reviewed several literary sources including relevant scientific articles and books.

### Etymology of Polygamy<sup>28</sup> Polygyny, Polyandry, and Polygynandry

Polygamy is a term derived from the Greek words, *poly* meaning "many" and *gamous* meaning "marriage". To put it simply, polygamy means the practice of multiple marriages. Initially, polygamy maintained a neutral definition that is inclined to neither men nor women. This implies that polygamy did not refer to a man who engages in multiple marriages (a man with many wives), or a woman who has multiple marriages (a woman with many husbands), and a man who exchanges wives or a woman who exchanges husbands in several marriages. Thus, regardless of the form, if multiple marriages occurred between the same person (who could be a man or woman), it

<sup>13</sup> Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 153-54.

was considered as polygamy. In practice, however, the history of polygamy undertook a different meaning in line with the history of social development, most notably in the history of family studies. Zeitzen describes the practice of polygamy in various sociocultural settings and introduced the terms polygyny, polyandry, and polygynandry.<sup>7</sup>

These three words are also derived from two Greek words, *poly* meaning many and *gyni* meaning man. Thus, polygyny is a term that refers to a man who has more than one wife. Polyandry, on the other hand, is derived from the word *poly* meaning many and *andros* meaning woman, and refers to a woman who has more than one husband. Meanwhile, polygynandry is defined as a polygynous and polyandrous group marriage. The term is derived from the Greek words *poly* meaning many, *gyn* meaning man, and *andros* meaning woman. Thus, polygamy can refer to three distinct types of multiple marriages.

According to Zeitzen the practice of polygamy is, hence, a dynamic, flexible, and non-homogenous marital event.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, polygamy as a polygynous affair does not only concerns a marital event where a man has many wives; it also covers various dimensions that can be considerable points to study such as gender, health, economy, and even men's sexual dominance over women. Hence, polygyny, in its development as a form of polygamy, is a practice of patriarchic ideology dominance justified by social, political, and economic arguments, and frequently claimed as a religious teaching and sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad in Islam.

Zeitzen found the origin of polygamy as a polygynous, polyandrous, or polygynandrous practice when marriage (in the specific sense of sexual relations between men and women or mating) has been formalized. The formalization process took place before the advent of monotheistic religions. According to Morgan (as cited in Engels,<sup>9</sup> the formalization of ancient marriage relates to the accumulation of wealth (property). This means that polygamy can be viewed as an ancient cultural strategy for securing and circulating assets within a specific social group. As a family anthropologist, Morgan also

24

<sup>7</sup> Miriam Koktvedgaard Zeitzen, *Polygamy: A Cross Cultural Analysis* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Engels, Ernest Untermann, and Hans-Dieter Von Senff, *The Origin of The Family, Private Property and The State* (Swansea, N.S.W: Sumptibus Publications, 2018).



found what he termed the age of savagery as period during which polyandrous and polygynandrous marriages became a cultural norm preceding polygyny and monogamy.

The anthropological perspective of family history explains that a mother who is a woman with multiple husbands (polyandry) may be seen as a model of the ancient family structure centered on women. The mother as a woman is the head of the household for all her husbands and children, thereby forming a group (commune). However, in the ancient time, in addition to polyandry there was polygynandrous marital practice as well, in which every woman became mutually owned by men, or every man became mutually owned by women (also known as unregulated sexual relation). Polyandry places the woman at the center of marriage, whereas polygynandry places both woman and man on an equal position within the context of ancient marriage. Both polyandry and polygynandry do not elevate women above men.

### Polygyny From the Perspective of Islamic Law

10

Although Islam discusses polygyny, as provisioned in the Qur'an *sūrat al-Nisā'* verse 3, the verse on polygyny was revealed in response to the cultural context of the time. Polygyny has been practiced by other religious communities such as Hindus, Mormons, and other cultural communities for a long period of time prior to Islam, as it is considered as a sociocultural phenomenon.<sup>10</sup>

Islam's legal basis for allowing polygyny refers to the Qur'an *sūrat al-Nisā'*, verse 3. According to a number of *riwāyah* (report),<sup>11</sup> the verse used to permit polygyny as a legal basis in the Islamic legal system correlates with the possession of property/wealth. Various

25

<sup>10</sup> Thom Brooks, "The Problem with Polygamy," *Philosophical Topics*, 37, 2 (2009), pp. 109-122.

<sup>11</sup> Ibn Jarīr al-Thabari, *Jami' al-Bayan fi Ta'wil al-Qur'an* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 1999), p. 574. Also see: Al-Qurthubi, *Al-Jawāb li Ahkām al-Qur'an* (Cairo: Dār al-Hadīth, 1995), p. 15; Ibnu Katsir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1999), p. 508; Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūthī, *Al-Dur al-Mansur fi al-Tafsir al-Ma'tsur* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1993), p. 427; Ibn 'Asyūr, *Tafsir al-Tabrīr wa al-Tanwīr* (Tunisia: Dār Suhnūn li al-Nasyrwa al-Tauzī, 1997), p. 222; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Al-Tafsir al-Kabīr* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1995), pp. 178-179; Ibn Jarīr al-Thabari, *Jami' al-Bayan fi Ta'wil al-Qur'an* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 1999), pp. 573-578; Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūthī, *Al-Dur al-Mansur fi al-Tafsir al-Ma'tsur* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1993), p. 427; Ibn 'Asyūr, *Tafsir al-Tabrīr wa al-Tanwīr* (Tunisia: Dār Suhnūn li al-Nasyrwa al-Tauzī, 1997), p. 223.

*riwayah* explains that polygyny emerged because of man's desire to gain material wealth from the second wife, or the third and so forth by marrying them. Verse 3 in the Qur'an *sūrat al-Nisā'* was then revealed to extend justice to women who would be married as a second wife, or a third and so forth. Polygyny may, thus, be considered as a type of concession for men to provide protection for the women they will marry. Such understanding explains the context of the revelation of this verse, where the conditions of social cultural relation in the Arab community still placed male dominance over women.<sup>12</sup>

Various interpretations of Islamic legal text (sharia) that are generally applicable (not only in Saudi Arabia) prohibit a woman from seeking protection from any man unless she is married to him. Hence, allowing men to marry a lot of women legitimately serves as a logical alternative to fulfill women's need for male protection. In fact, the legal substance of polygyny may be understood in the Qur'an *sūrat al-Nisā'* verse 3 as being centered on the principle of justice for protecting women from property/wealth acquisition by men. This means that verse 3 of the Qur'an *sūrat al-Nisā'* employs a female perspective, despite the fact that male dominance was prevalent in the Arab culture at the time. This perspective is often lost or ignored in various legal debates and discussions whether polygyny is permissible or not. The principle of justice in the female perspective within a male dominant culture is the essential substance of polygyny. This fundamental substance in the relationship between text and context of the polygyny law resulted in the formation of numerous legal opinions and perspectives by various ulemas. With the varying arguments given about the law on polygyny, the ulemas were then classified into two broad categories, namely:

*First*, some classical Islam ulemas allow the polygyny law.<sup>13</sup> Polygyny, in this group's opinion, is one of the most significant

<sup>12</sup> Hanan Ahmad Khimish, "The Impact of Religion on Arab Women," *International Journal of Business and Social Science* 5, 3 (2014), pp. 132-142. Also see: Akram Shalghin, "Toward Understanding Arab Women's Cultural Landscapes," *International Journal of Comparative Literature & Translation Studies*, 5, 2 (2017), pp. 14-18; Ruth Ulrich, *Women In Islamic Societies: A Selected Review Of Social Scientific Literature* (New York: Nova Publishers, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> al-Rāzī, *Al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, p. 181. Also see Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī, *Mabāsīnat-Ta'wīl* (Cairo: Dār al-Hadīth, 2003), p. 18; al-Suyūthī, *Al-Dur al-Mantsūr fī al-Tafsīr al-Ma'ṣūr*, p. 429; Ibn Katsīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'an al-'Aẓīm*, p. 508; Ibn 'Asyūr, *Tafsīr al-Tabrīr wa al-Tanwīr*, p. 227.

sources of criticism against Islam, both among the ulemas themselves and non-Muslim scholars. It is undeniable that Islam justifies polygyny through text and historical context, but feminists, Islamic reformists, and Western critics regard it as an ancient practice that oppresses women.<sup>14</sup>

*Second*, some contemporary Islam ulemas allow the application of the polygyny law with some reservations and it may be practiced based on the principle of justice for women.<sup>15</sup> It is this principle of justice for women as the essential substance of the polygyny law which is being emphasized here. Accordingly, the essential substance of this principle could instead open up a broader and more dynamic room for discourse in producing laws on polygyny. By citing the female perspective and the justice principle as a substance for allowing polygyny, it will raise serious questions such as: if a woman has an infertile husband, is the wife permitted to have multiple husbands (polyandry)? Is it permissible for the wife to have more than one husband (polyandry)? If the wife's sexual desire is greater than her husband? Is it permissible for the wife who is younger than her husband to have multiple husbands (polyandry) when the husband is in andropause?

The various questions posed by using the female perspective above explain that Islamic jurisprudence or the construction of Islamic law (sharia) in the middle ages and various *ijtībāds* of the ulemas were influenced by their period's patriarchal culture of thinking. Al-Hibri<sup>16</sup> considers that the patriarchal culture in the construction of the Islamic law (sharia) is convinced to be truth derived from texts of the Qur'an. Despite referring to the texts of the Qur'an, the construction of Islamic law (*sharī'ah*) is a product of *ijtībād* which is influenced patriarchal culture of thinking. As a result, the interpretation of the

3

<sup>14</sup> Heather Johnson, "There are Worse Things than Being Alone: Polygamy in Islam, Past, Present, and Future," *William & Mary Journal of Women and the Law*, 11, 3 (2005), pp. 563-596.

<sup>15</sup> Al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kasysyaf 'an Haqā'iq al- Tanzīl wa 'Uyūn al-Aqāwīl fī Wujūb al-Ta'wīl*, vol I (Cairo: Maktabah Mishr, n.d.), p. 409. Compare to al-Baydlāwī, *Anwār al-Tanzīl wa Asrār al-Ta'wīl* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1996), p. 144. Also see Muhammad Rasyīd Ridlā, *Tafsīr al-Qur'an al-Hakīm* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmiyah, 1999), pp. 284-285; Ahmad Musthafā al-Maraghī, *Tafsīr al-Maraghī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmiyah, 1998), p. 151.

<sup>16</sup> Aziza al-Hibri, "Islam, Law, and Custom: Redefining Muslim Women's Rights," *American University Journal of International Law and Policy*, 12, 1(1997), pp. 1-44.



Quranic text as an Islamic law (sharia) in this particular case became mainstream while it is actually based on the interest of the patriarchy. He even considers that this various *ijtihad*s in Islamic law (sharia) were unable to avoid the patriarchal beliefs, customs, and culture that were developing around men.

### 1 Male Sexual Desire in Polygyny: Between Sexual Sublimation and Subtle Sexuality

Sexual sublimation in the findings of the study may be defined as the act of transferring the intensity of sexual drives and desires in the male spouse from the first wife to the second, the third, or the fourth wife through polygyny. This definition emerges from the interviews with the four informants, as each of them had intense sexual desires that were satisfied through polygyny. Sexual sublimation, in this sense, does not mean the *transfer* of sexual desire to nonsexual activities, as defined in the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud,<sup>17</sup> but rather the *transfer* of intense sexual urges that arise as a result of legitimate sexual activities that actors of polygyny believe to be a religious teaching.

According to the second informant, he chose polygyny because his sexual drive outweighed all other considerations. Due to his sexual proclivities, the Second informant chose a second wife who is younger and prettier than the first.

“If I were to engage in polygamy (polygyny – Researcher) there are three conditions. First, (the second wife – Researcher) must be prettier (than the first – Researcher). Second, must be younger. Third, must be in accordance with Islamic sharia. Having another wife, also increases sexual intensity. As long as it’s (sexual experience with the first wife – Researcher) different, the sexual intensity also increases. So, polygyny is practiced so that sexual desire is channeled properly”.<sup>18</sup>

As for the Third informant, he also chose a polygynous relationship because his first wife could not satisfy his sexual desires. However, it was also because he has no children from his first

19  
<sup>17</sup> Ana Siljak, “Sigmund Freud, Sublimation, and The Russian Silver Age,” *Modern Intellectual History*, 15, 2 (2018), pp. 443-470. Also see Volney Patrick Gay, *18 On Sublimation: Reconsideration* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); Rossella Valdré, *On Sublimation: a Path to the Destiny of Desire, Theory, and Treatment* (London: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>18</sup> Interview, September 7, 2019.

marriage. Sexual drive seems to be the more dominant motivation in this case, as the third informant stated that he has more sex with his second wife than he does with his first.

“I have an appetite in me, while she (first wife – Researcher) could not satisfy my sexual needs. I told her, in this household it is harmonious if there is sexual relationship. But my sexual needs were not fulfilled, we don't have any child too. And she let me engage in polygyny. Both of my wives are beautiful and fair. Is just that my second wife is younger. With my first wife, since she is frigid, I have sex with her once a month, or twice a month it's not a problem, she doesn't demand it, while my second wife, we can do it every day but we look at the situation. Usually, it's three to four times a week”.<sup>19</sup>

The transference of such huge sexual energy is concurrently a form of sexual release. Since sex in Islamic law relates to *halal* and *haram*, when sexual urges cannot be satisfied through other nonsexual activities such as engaging in arts<sup>20</sup> or sports, even activities of sexual fantasy like masturbation, polygyny serves as a means of satisfying sexual desire through a sexual relationship that is *halal* according to Islamic sharia. This description is revealed through the informants' various brief statements, “*it's better to engage in polygamy than commit adultery (polygyny – Researcher)*”.

Polygyny serves as a mechanism to protect the family from deviant illegal sex acts and transmission of sexual diseases. The decision to engage in polygyny for the purpose of avoiding adultery is considered safer as it is in accordance with Islamic sharia. Meanwhile, according to another Islamic perspective, the Prophet Muhammad stated, “*A woman comes in the form of a devil and goes in the form of a devil. If one of you sees a woman, let him go to his wife, for that will repel what he feels in his heart.*” (HR. Muslim no. 1403). This hadith provides a resolute perspective for husbands with strong sexual desires. According to Haneef and Razak,<sup>21</sup> based on this perspective, wives should take measures that lead their husband to the most satisfying sexual relationship in order to

<sup>19</sup> Interview, September 14, 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Sigmund Freud and G. Stanley Hall, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (Lawrence, KS: Digireads.com Publishing, 2013), pp. 467-468.

<sup>21</sup> Sayed Sikandar Shah Haneef and Mohd Abbas Bin Abdul Razak, “Stabilizing Muslim Marriages: Some Reflections on Ethical Management of Family Law,” *Mazhab*, 16, 1 (2017), pp. 33-50.

discourage them from seeking out other partners. Concurrently, husbands are also required to return to their wife when they see other women that may arouse or stimulate their sexual desires.

Accordingly, polygamy with the “*it’s better to engage in polygyny than commit adultery*” reasoning can be thwarted by means of the wife providing sexual satisfaction to her husband. While, concurrently, the husband can restrain himself from engaging in polygamy by returning to his wife. In such relationship, Islamic law maintains the internal concept of *nushūz* (refraction) as stated by Allah SWT, “*But those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance – [first] advise them; [then if they persist], forsake them in bed; and [finally], strike them. But if they obey you [once more], seek no means against them.*” (QS 4:34).

Accepting the statement “*It’s better to engage in polygyny than commit adultery*” is considered by Smith<sup>22</sup> as the result of traditional schools such as *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) teaching women to be an ideal Muslimah that adheres to the sharia-based concept of piety determined by men who established polygamy as the norm. However, in the context of sexual relationship within polygynous marriages, women may inadvertently become an object of sexual lust for men.<sup>23</sup>

This shows that polygyny is indeed understood as an Islamic law or sharia. Polygyny functions as a sort of sharia-compliant route to sexual satisfaction. According to the second informant, polygyny enables him to channel his sexual desires in accordance with Islamic teachings. This finding reemphasizes the fine line between polygyny motivated by sexual desire and polygyny motivated by Islamic teachings or special circumstances such as an infertile wife. Only the Second informant cited his wife’s infertility as a reason for practicing polygyny. Nevertheless, this argument contains a bias due the fact that it is based on male’s perspective. Since the informant was unable to provide evidence that his wife is indeed infertile.

This is a crucial explanation since according to Bennett<sup>24</sup> being sterile and infertile may also be experienced by the husband (male

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<sup>22</sup> Bianca J. Smith, “Sexual Desire, Piety, and Law in a Javanese *Pesantren*: Interpreting Varieties of Secret Divorce and Polygamy,” *Anthropological Forum* 24, 3 (2014), pp. 227-244.

<sup>23</sup> Haideh Moghissi. *Feminism and Islamic*.

<sup>24</sup> Linda Rae Bennett, et.al., “Reproductive Knowledge and Patient Education Needs among Indonesian Women Infertility Patients Attending Three Fertility Clinics,” *Patient Education and Counseling* 98, 3 (2015), pp. 364-369.

infertility). Infertility, clinically speaking, is a disorder of the reproductive system that is indicated by the failure to achieve clinical pregnancy following 12 months or more of regular sexual intercourse without the use of condoms or any other contraceptives.<sup>25</sup> This perspective needs to be presented because the issue of infertility is often considered to originate from women. While according to Olooto,<sup>26</sup> research indicates that the male factor accounted for 40-50% of infertility on humans.

The fine boundary between polygyny driven by sexual desire and polygyny driven by Islamic teachings may be defined as a duality. Anthony Giddens<sup>27</sup> proposed the term 'duality' to describe his theory of structuration. One of the essential concepts in the theory of structuration is duality, which explains how social acts are established simultaneously by existing rules and actors, rather than separately. This implies that rules can motivate individuals to act, and that an individual's action can be considered as a rule.

As a duality, the intensity of sexual desire and the existing rule in the Islamic text on polygyny both meet and exist within a single reality called marriage. Both of them are neither hierarchical (the text on polygyny is situated above sexual desire) nor equal (the text on polygyny is parallel to sexual desire). They both exist in their respective positions, yet they can only correlate when a man engages in polygynous practice. As a result of the study's findings, duality is defined as something distinct from dualism. In a dualism, the correlation between the intensity of male sexual desire and the existing Islamic text on polygyny exists separately and are mutually influential in the form of cause and effect. Male sexual desire may be heightened as a result of the polygyny text, or intense male sexual desire may be legitimized by the polygyny text.

The dualism between the intensity of male sexual desire and the existing Islamic text on polygyny is what we will refer to as subtle sexuality in the future. Subtle sexuality, according to the study's

<sup>25</sup> Zegers F. Hochschild., et al., "The International Committee for Monitoring Assisted Reproductive Technology (ICMART) and the World Health Organization (WHO) Revised Glossary on ART Terminology, 2009," *Human Reproduction* 24, 11 (2009): pp. 26-86.

<sup>26</sup> Wasiu E. Olooto, "Infertility in Male: Risk Factors, Causes and Management- A Review," *Journal of Microbiology and Biotechnology Research*, 2, 4 (2012), pp. 641-645.

<sup>27</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984).



findings, refers to sexual desire and lust that develops subtly within the husband's self and seeks satisfaction through another partner. The presence of this subtly developing sexual desire and lust may have gone unnoticed and it may be often conveyed in an ambiguous manner. In the context of polygyny, for instance, subtle sexuality appears by seeking textual legitimacy. Hence, subtle sexuality seems to be insignificant but it may be a very determining element in terms of legitimacy as it gains textual justification from *nafs*.

The thought concerning these subtle matters actually emerges from various discussions on media and culture studies and their impact on social construction. It is assumed that culture and media mutually influence one another in complex and subtle ways but they become socially accepted truths.<sup>28</sup>In practice, these subtle matters may, for instance, appear in subtly conducted discriminatory treatments.<sup>29</sup>

According to the four informants, such subtle sexuality is sensed in their narratives and emerges subtly in the brief responses. For example: "*Sexual consideration is definitely there, but it should be in line with sharia*" (First Informant), "*There are conditions when wanting to get married (polygyny), first has to be prettier. Second, the second has to be richer. Third, it has to be in accordance with Islamic sharia*" (Second Informant), "*My first wife cannot satisfy my sexual needs, every time I ask her to have sex, when she has sex she is frigid and unwilling*" (Third Informant), "*Sexual desire is indeed there, but it is not easy because the husband must have the capacity of being fair*" (Fourth Informant). These responses were collected when the informants were asked, "*Is the decision to practice polygyny due to an intense sexual desire or because Islam allows polygyny?*" Their responses were interpreted as a form of subtle sexuality that appears in the form of concealing their most delicate sexual sense behind the text that allows husbands to practice polygyny. Such subtle matter is akin to an extremely minute net hole that leaks drops of strong sexual orientation in the practice of polygyny. These drops of strong sexual orientation in polygyny deal with the image of pleasure, a moment of arousal which then materializes into an arena of celebrating the husband's bodily sense through the celebration of polygyny.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph B. McFadden, *Understanding Media and Culture: an Introduction to Mass Communication* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing, Minneapolis, 2016).

<sup>29</sup> Kristen P. Jones, et.al., "Not So Subtle: A Meta-analysis of the Correlates of Subtle and Overt Discrimination," *Journal of Management*, 42, 6 (2016), pp. 1588–1613.



Despite being considered as something that is still a taboo, sexual desire in the practice of polygyny, in the form of sublimation or subtle sexuality, should not necessarily be concealed. As stipulated in the words “*those that please you of [other] women*” in the Qur’ān *sūrat al-Nisā*’ verse 3 which represents the presence of the husband’s sexual desire towards the woman is about to marry as the second, third, or fourth wife. This explains the presence of a subtle ‘gap’ and ‘distance’ pertaining to what the text intends to say and what is actually said by the text. Hence, to understand the polygyny text, sexual desire as a motive for polygyny should be conveyed to understand what is intended to be said, so that the presence of the various conditions surrounding the text may be revealed. Because, according to Diamond,<sup>30</sup> sexual activities can indeed be something that is exceedingly enjoyable. Although sexual desire is a subtle and sublime matter in the practice of polygyny, sexual sublimation and subtle sexuality in polygyny are understood differently by the interviewees. There are those who consider sexual activities as something recreational, while there are those who understand them to be for the purpose of procreation.

### **Male Sexual Desire in Polygyny: Between Recreation and Procreation**

The basic element of sexual motivation is sexual desire or lust. Sexual desire means sexual motivation, which is usually manifested as a desire for sexual enjoyment and activities. Greater sexual desires generate more frequent and more intense efforts to attain sexual satisfaction.<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, sex can provide both physical and nonphysical pleasures. Therefore, an individual engaging in sex would certainly expect to gain physical and nonphysical pleasures from it.

Nevertheless, in addition to obtaining physical enjoyment and nonphysical pleasure, sexual intercourse is often done to bear children and descendants. The physical pleasure and nonphysical enjoyment

<sup>30</sup> Jared M. Diamond, *Why Is Sex Fun? The Evolution Of Human Sexuality* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2015). Also see Ivan Bernik and Valentina Hlebec, *Sexual Satisfaction Among Slovenian Youth* (Ljubljana: Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar, 2000).

<sup>31</sup> Lori A. Brotto and Kelly B. Smith, “Sexual Desire and Pleasure,” D. L. Tolman and L. M. Diamond (eds), *APA Handbook of Sexuality and Psychology* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2014), pp 205-244.

attained from sex is considered as sexual intercourse for recreation. Whereas sexual intercourse carried out for the purpose of having children and descendants is known as intercourse for procreation. The functions of recreational intercourse include satisfying sexual needs, enjoying intercourse, time, and the ways sexual intercourse are conducted. While the function of procreation is the regeneration of the humankind from time to time.<sup>32</sup>

Both recreational and procreation sex within the context of certain culture may be conducted without having to be bonded in a legitimate matrimonial institution. Accordingly, all cultures and regions have varying standards in defining pleasure in sexual life.<sup>33</sup> However, this study places sexual intercourse as recreation or procreation in the context of polygyny, which is a legitimate marriage between one husband and several wives.

From the four polygynous practitioners interviewed in the study, all conduct foreplay prior to having intercourse in order to attain pleasure and enjoyment (recreation). Despite its recreational purpose, only the third informant had wanted to have children because he could not have children from the first wife. It is interesting to note that the third informant has more frequent sexual intercourse with the second wife than he does with the first.

“With my first wife, since she is frigid I have sex with her once a month, or twice a month it’s not a problem, she doesn’t demand it, while my second wife, we can do it every day but we look at the situation. Usually it’s three to four times a week. It’s been 2 years of polygamy, and praise God we have a child”.<sup>34</sup>

The Third informant is 46 years old, his first wife is 41 years old while his second wife is 20 years old. The age difference between the first and second wife is 21 years. While age difference between the Third informant and the second wife is 26 years. The age difference

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<sup>32</sup> Diamond, *Why is Sex Fun?*. Also see Sharon Moalem, *How Sex Works: Why 17 Look, Smell, Taste, Feel, and Act the Way We Do* (New York : Harper Perennial, 2010); Giuseppe Benagiano and Maurizio Mori, “The Origins of Human Sexuality: Procreation or Recreation?” *Reproductive Bio Medicine Online* 18, 1(2009), pp. 50-59; Roy J. Levin, “Recreation and Procreation: A Critical View of Sex in the Human Female,” *Clinical Anatomy* 28, 3(2015), pp. 339-354.

<sup>33</sup> Virginia Rutter and Pepper Schwartz, *The Gender of Sexuality: Exploring Sexual Possibilities* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012).

<sup>34</sup> Interview, September 14, 2019.

and the sexual intensity of the Third informant with his second wife show that the recreational consideration of attaining pleasure and enjoyment is more pronounced than the consideration of having children (procreation).

As for the Second informant, he has a rather unique point of view. He thinks that after engaging in a polygynous marriage, his sexual desire has increased instead, because he experiences different sexual sensations between the first and the second wife. The Second informant is 49 years old, his first wife is 45 years old, while his second wife is 30 years old. These different sexual sensations experienced by having intercourse with different people indicate that sex in the polygynous marriage is done to gain pleasure and enjoyment (recreation). To describe the spiritual conditions of the sexual experience in the recreational polygynous marriage, the Second informant made an analogy of cattle breeding in New Zealand.

“After polygamy the sexual activities has in fact increased, as long as it’s different (the sensation). It’s like the story of Australian or New Zealand cattle. The cattle owner said, ‘This is an amazing bull, it can mate 5x a day, that one 10x a day. And it only eats grass, while you gentlemen eat everything, but once a week (of intercourse with the wife – Researcher) and you have back pain’. A guest then asked, ‘That bull that mates 5x and 10x, is it with just one cow?’ The owner replied, ‘No, there are different cows’. If (you mate) with the same one, then you’d be bored looking at it. So my lust has not dropped but it has increased instead”.<sup>35</sup>

Whereas the First informant, his sexual activities with the second wife depends on the approval of the first. The First informant is 37 years old, his first wife is 30 years old, while his second wife is 32 years old. This is also a unique finding since personal and private sexual intercourse in this specific polygynous marriage is still managed as a collective issue involving the first wife who is older than the second. However, the First informant does not neglect the fact that there is a difference in sexual desire between the first and second wife, although it is not related with age. The difference in sexual sensation between the first and second wife also contains a message that the intercourse is meant for recreational purpose.

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<sup>35</sup> Interview, September 10, 2019.

“Sexual matters between the wives can be different, depending on the (first) wife, whether she agrees or not. At the start we’ve made a pact, several days with the first wife, several days with the second wife. If one of them sincerely accepts, that’s good. In terms of lust, of course there is lust, because we made a choice (before practicing polygyny). Although the intent was to provide help, we still consider her facial features”.<sup>36</sup>

Meanwhile, the Fourth informant used the analogy of ‘young wife like a vessel’ to sublimate his sexual intercourse with the young wife as something recreational.

“I am still able (to have sex with my wives – Researcher). They (the wives – Researcher) are like vessels. If the vessel were to get smaller, what used to be 200 cc now becomes 100 cc, it is enough for me to pour in 100 cc for her (the first wife – Researcher). Now, with her (the younger wife – Researcher), her vessel can still contain a lot. I pour quite a lot, according to her portion.”<sup>37</sup>

All the explanations above indicate that sexual intercourse between husband and wives in polygynous marriages is a recreational activity. As something recreational, the sexual activities between the husband and both wives place women sexuality in a position where the husband is the determiner and not her own self. Since the women’s sexuality is defined by referring to the husband, then the wives in a polygynous marriage is merely incidental, and nothing essential. The husband is the subject and he is absolute—whereas women is the other.<sup>38</sup> The relationship between them becomes a matter of sex for mere recreational purpose within the context of subject and object.

When engaging in sexual intercourse, both husband and wife may gain pleasure and enjoyment as it is preceded by **g**oreplay. This activity is in line with the hadith of God’s Messenger : *“Not one of you should fall upon his wife like an animal; but let there first be a messenger between you”* *“And what is that messenger?” they asked, and he replied: “kisses and words.”*<sup>39</sup> However, the relational perspective of the husband as the subject and the second wife as the object is a significant relational substance that

<sup>36</sup> Interview, September 7, 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Interview, September 17, 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage Classic, 2015).

<sup>39</sup> Abū Hāmid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn* (Beirut: Dar al-Ma’rifah, n.d.), p. 50.

should be brought up to release women (wives) from their marginalized sexual isolation under the authority of male sexual subordination.<sup>40</sup>

The substance of the relationship subsequently raises a question as to why does the second wife tend to accept their condition within sexual intercourse as an incidental object? De Beauvoir explained about the matter by using Hegel's master-slave theory of dialectics. According to Hegel, both master and slave demand acknowledgement. This means that the master demands acknowledgement as the master, and that his/her existence is there because of the slave. Accordingly, the master-slave relationship according to Hegel is a united relationship of mutual needs. The husband needs to discharge his sexual desire, while the wife needs acknowledgement from the husband.<sup>41</sup>

In this perspective, the issue of sexuality in polygyny has surpassed the concept of recreation or procreation. To elaborate on this, we employ Michel Foucault's perspective on the history of sexuality. According to Foucault, the history of sexuality does not necessarily refer to intimate or sexual relationship. Sexuality refers to the issue of how a discourse becomes power that has the capacity to touch, enter, penetrate, occupy, and even commit individual control in order to feel the most intimate sexual pleasures. This is achieved by producing discourse and spreading it through rejection, prohibition, stimulation, seduction, and intensification (the various forms of power techniques).<sup>42</sup> To reach that goal, religious texts may be used accordingly as conveyed by religious figures, such as narratives that wives should be obedient to their husband, or that a husband's approval is of the essence for his wife, or that if a husband were to ask the wife to engage in sexual intercourse, she is not allowed to refuse, and so forth.

### Conclusion

Despite the fact that Islam permits husbands to have two, three, and four wives, polygyny is frequently practiced from a male perspective. One of the elements that is concealed from the male

<sup>40</sup> Moghissi. *Feminism and Islamic*.

<sup>41</sup> Beauvoir. *The Second*.

<sup>42</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: an Introduction* (New York, NY: Spark Publishing, 2014).



perspective is their huge sexual desire. Hence polygyny is viewed as a solution consistent with religious teachings. “it is better to engage in polygamy than to commit adultery,” emphasizes the husband’s sexual superiority to the wife. Thus, justifying polygyny on the basis of male sexual intensity is wild proposition that requires taming.

The first means of taming polygyny as a result of the male’s (husband’s) intense sexual desire is to develop a novel understanding of the relationship between text (polygyny related holy texts) and the past Arabian cultural context. Second, deconstruction of sexual sublimation and subtle sexuality in polygyny practice. Third, finding a wife is as incidental to polygynous marriages as sexual intercourse between husband and wife. As a result, the wife is the other in a polygynous relationship. The two develop a sexual relationship for recreational instead of procreative purposes.

The findings in this study may have implications for the emergence of new meanings and understandings about polygyny as a permanent sexual transaction through the use of religious justifications. The study’s findings may also be used to raise women’s awareness of sexual deception that is formally packaged and presented as essential, but is actually incidental. Women or wives are not men’s or their husband’s sexual objects. In the context of polygyny, why are some wives willing to be sexually objectified by men? By focusing on the female perspective or the wife’s point of view, this is undoubtedly an intriguing area of research for future studies. []

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