

Polygamy Terms

Introduction

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.

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: 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 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.

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.

Second premise: One of the natural rights of all human beings is the right to marriage and formation of a family. 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. 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.

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.

Islam is criticized for allowing polygamy, for popular culture in the West views polygamy as relatively backward and impoverished. For many Christians, it is a license to promiscuity, and feminists consider it a violation of women's rights and demeaning to women. A crucial point that needs to be understood is that for Muslims, standards of morality are not set by prevalent Western thought, but by divine revelation. A few simple facts should be borne in mind before any talk of polygamy in Islam.

Islam Did Not Initiate Polygamy

Islam did not introduce polygamy. Among all Eastern nations of antiquity, polygamy was a recognized institution. Among the Hindus, polygamy prevailed from the earliest times. There was, as among the ancient Babylonians, Assyrians, and Persians, no restriction as to the number of wives a man might have. Although Greece and Rome were not polygamous societies, concubinage was a norm[1]. Islam regulated polygamy by limiting the number of wives and bringing responsibility to its practice. In fact, according to David Murray, an anthropologist, historically polygamy is more common than monogamy.

Polygamy Practiced by God's Prophets

The great Hebrew patriarchs equally revered by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - Abraham, Moses, Jacob, David, and Solomon, to name a few - were polygamous. According to the Bible:

Abraham had three wives (Genesis 16:1, 16:3, 25:1)

Moses had two wives (Exodus 2:21, 18:1-6; Numbers 12:1)

Jacob had four wives (Genesis 29:23, 29:28, 30:4, 30:9)

David had at least 18 wives (1 Samuel 18:27, 25:39-44; 2 Samuel 3:3, 3:4-5, 5:13, 12:7-8, 12:24, 16:21-23)

Solomon had 700 wives (1 Kings 11:3).[3]

The example of Jesus, who otherwise overlooked polygamy, is irrelevant as he did not marry during his earthly ministry.

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:

...فَانكِحُوا 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]...” Surah Nisa’ 4:3.

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.