

# **Experiences of Shona Men in Polygamous Marriages in Ward Four of Chivi District, Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe**

by

**Christinah Gwirayi**

cgwirayi@gmail.com

Lecturer, Simon Muzenda School of Arts, Culture and Heritage Studies  
Great Zimbabwe University

## **Abstract**

The study explored the experiences of Shona men in polygamous marriages from two villages in Ward 4 of Chivi, Zimbabwe. The age range of participants was between forty five and sixty five years. Six participants were selected using snowball sampling while data were gathered using face to face interviews. Responses were recorded using a digital voice recorder and analysed using the thematic content analysis technique. Results indicated that men in polygamous families experience a number of problems such as financial constraints, strained relationships with their children, conflicts with wives, insults, sickness and loneliness. The study also revealed that men are open to discuss their marital problems. However, in some rare cases positive effects like marital satisfaction were also reported. It is recommended that counselling service providers should introduce programmes that support and cater for the needs of males in order to build sustainable families and homes.

**Key terms:** polygamy; experiences; Shona

## **Introduction**

Polygamy is a marriage system that is rooted in tradition and transmitted from one generation to the next (Gumani & Sodi, 2009). From its Greek origin, the word polygamy is understood to mean simultaneous multiple marriage unions for one person, such as female polyandry and male polygamy (Yamani, 2008). In this study polygamy refers to the marriage of a man to more than one wife; this is the most common form of polygamy, also known as Polygny. Polygamy is legally practised in various countries in the Middle East, Asia and Africa (Al-Sharfin, 2015).

In Zimbabwe, while polygamy is prohibited under the civil law; it is accepted under the customary law. In traditional Shona society, a man could have as many wives as possible, provided he could afford to take care of the needs of the family (Bourdillion, 1987). For the Shona people it was not easy for a man to have many wives, polygamy was a preserve for rich people, particularly kings and senior members of the community (Bourdillion, 1987). This can be attributed to the fact that polygamy calls for a big family which demands more resources for its upkeep. The idea is further expounded by Makaudze (2015) who argues that because of the social and economic challenges that are associated with polygamy, not every man in traditional Shona society was an ideal candidate for this type of marriage. Gelfand (1973) advances a number of reasons why the Shona people practised polygamy. It was a solution to high mortality rate, a remedy for infertility, desire for a great clan and a solution to infidelity.

Despite its negative effects on children, wives as well as husbands, polygamy continues to survive as a type of marriage in the Middle East, Asia and Africa (Al-Sharfin, Pfeffer & Miller, 2015). Its continued existence in contemporary society has been attributed to a number of factors such as men's desire to prevent divorce (Gaskiyane, 2000). This usually occurs when the wife is barren, fails to give male sons or less sexually active (Baloyi, 2013). Gelfand (1973) argues that a childless marriage among the Shona people is always a bitter disappointment. Thus it is clear that some men may marry more than one wife to serve their first wives from experiencing the rejection experienced by divorced women and its detrimental effects for the women's self-esteem as well as to ensure that they have children who will take care of them when they grow old. More so, divorce among the Shona people was not tolerated hence the Shona saying *Chinorambwa isadza mukadzi haarabwi* (A woman should not be divorced).

The continued existence of polygamy in many countries has been attributed to the fact that some people still support it. Despite the growing evidence that polygamy places women at a higher risk of psychiatric disorders (Ozkan et al., 2006), abuse (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001) and loneliness (Al-Krenawi et al., 2001) people still engage in it willingly. Baloyi (2013) argues that in many African cultures it is the norm for an adult to be married and to have children. Furthermore Rutoro and Madimbo (2015) argue that being single in Africa in the sense of never having been married is regarded as the worst fate that can happen to a woman. As such many women prefer being second or third wives instead of not being married at all (Slonim-Nevo, Al-Krenawi & Yuval-Shani, 2008). In traditional Shona society singlehood was not tolerated (Grand & Mazuru, 2011). Furthermore Makaudze (2015) argues that husbandlessness and wifelessness were treated with contempt among the Shona people. Given that scenario, polygamy was used to escape from social ridicule. It is also important to note that women get involved in polygamy out of their free will to do so (Grand & Mazuru, 2011). Some other women may have realised that they have reached marriageable age but have not yet found potential single men to marry them; they would prefer to settle for a married man. In some cases some single women get involved with married men with the full knowledge that they are going into a polygamous marriage.

Slonim-Nevo et al. (2008) argue that economic and social changes have led to the practice of polygamy rendered less sustainable and worthwhile than in the past. More so Esmaili, Sadrpushan and Gorji (2012) carried out a comparative study on the quality of life for men in monogamous and polygamous families and found out that the quality of life for men in monogamous families is better than that of those in polygamous families. Furthermore, they also found out that the father of the family could not simultaneously support and supervise two or three families. Slonim- Nevo et al. (2008) also found that fathers are usually cut off or distant from their children as a result of conflict between the parents. Thus men in polygamous marriages are reported to have more mental health problems than their peers in monogamous families. The lives of men in polygamous marriages are complicated emotionally and financially.

Most studies done on polygamy have focussed on the experiences of polygamy on women and children. Research has shown that women in polygamous marriages are confronted with a number of problems such as abuse, economic difficulties (Al-Krenawi & Lev-Wiesel, 2002; Hassouneh – Phillips,2001),favouritism, jealousy, neglect and dissatisfaction (Al- Krenawi et al., 2008: Hassouneh – Phillips, 2001:Gumani & Sodi,2009).Negative experiences of polygamy on children have also been documented. For instance low academic achievement, negligence and bitterness have been reported among children in polygamous families (Al-Krenawi & Slomin-Nevo, 2008: Al-Sharfin, 2015). In polygamous families conflicts among co-wives are inevitable and at times, children are caught up in those conflicts (Al-Krenawi et al., 2001). Despite these negative effects of polygamy, both men and women continue to be involved in polygamous marriages.

Most of the studies that have investigated polygamy have reported more on the experiences of women and children than men (Al-Sharfin, 2015). For instance, men have been reported as the perpetrators of the problems and violence that polygamous families go through (Al-Krenawi et al., 2006; Gumani & Sodi, 2009). As a result, very little is known about the experiences of men in polygamous families in general and among the Shona people of Zimbabwe in particular. Thus, this study sought to contribute to existing literature by investigating the experiences of men in polygamous families in the Shona society. It is important to investigate the experiences of Shona men in polygamous marriages because they are often viewed as perpetrators of the negative experiences associated with such marriages. A good understanding of their experiences can help improve the quality of family life through providing solutions to family problems. Stable and peaceful family life is good for the upbringing of children and their social, emotional, moral and intellectual development.

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

The researcher made use of a phenomenological research design. According to Maypole and Davies (2001) phenomenology is concerned with the lived experiences of people. In this study which was concerned with the lived experiences of men in polygamy the phenomenological research design was useful. More so Heppner et al., (2016) argue that a phenomenological research design reveal new and meaningful knowledge about a particular phenomenon. This design focuses on individuals who have experienced the same phenomenon. Thus the participants in this study were considered to be information rich as they were all polygamists.

### **Participants**

Participants were six unemployed men from two villages in Ward 4 of Chivi District in the Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe. The participants lived in rural areas where subsistence farming is the major source of living. Participants were selected using snowball sampling. Rubin and Babbie (2009) define snowball sampling as the process of accumulation in which each subject suggests other subjects. Given the sensitive of the matter under investigation, snowball sampling was useful because each participant helped with the location of other members of the sample whom they know. Each participant interviewed was asked to suggest additional people to be included in the study. Snowball sampling enabled the researcher to select polygamous husbands who were able to provide valuable information because of experiences with the phenomenon which was under investigation. The age range of participants was between forty five and sixty five years. Older men were preferred so as to capture their experiences in polygamous marriages. More so older men were preferred because they have been in marriage for a long time hence had more information about the social phenomenon under investigation. The average number of wives was between two and three wives.

### **Research Instrument**

The researcher made use of face to face semi-structured interviews to collect data from the participants. The interviews were conducted in Shona language which was the first language of all the participants. This was done in order to ensure that the participants were able to narrate all their experiences using a language which they are comfortable with. Later the interviews were translated to English by the researcher. Face to face interviews can be used to solicit information from people who cannot otherwise provide information such as participants who are illiterate, bed ridden or very old (Bernard, 2006). In this study, face to face interviews enabled the research to collect information from illiterate and old people.

Babbie (2010) argues that semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to respond to the situation at hand and to new ideas on the topic. This enabled the researcher to gather as much information as possible from participants. The interviews were used to generate data on the experiences of men in polygamous marriages by focusing on the following issues; reasons for having more than one wife, relations between the husband and his wives, husband's relations with children, whether the husband enjoyed his marriage or not, and advice to other men regarding polygamous marriages.

## **Data Analysis**

Data obtained were captured using a voice recorder. The data were later transcribed and translated into English by the researcher. In analysing the data, the researcher used the thematic content analysis technique. According to DeSantis and Ugarriza (2000), thematic analysis involves the search for and identification of common threads that extend across an entire interview or set of interviews. In this study the technique enabled the researcher to identify themes which captured the experiences of Shona men in polygamous marriages.

## **Ethical Considerations**

The researcher obtained prior consent of the participants before the dates of the interviews (Butler - Kisber, 2010). The researcher also explained to the participants that their participation was voluntary and they were free to withdraw from the study at any time if they felt like doing so. The researcher promised them that confidentiality would be observed. Celia and Anushko (2008) argue that maintaining privacy and confidentiality helps to protect participants from potential harms such as distress, embarrassment and criminal or civil liability. Given the sensitivity of the phenomenon under investigation, it was important for the researcher to observe confidentiality.

## **Results**

The purpose of the study was to investigate the experiences of Shona men in polygamous marriages. Results are presented in five main themes which emerged from the data generated. These are reasons for having more than one wife, nature of relationship with wives, nature of relationship with children and advice to other men regarding polygamy. Direct quotations are used in order to accurately capture the views of the participants. In presenting results, pseudonyms are used in order to ensure confidentiality of the participants (Gumani & Sodi, 2009).

## **Reasons for Having More Than One Wife**

Varied reasons were given for taking a second or third wife. The following quotations reveal the different reasons why the participants found themselves in polygamy. The following responses by the participants illustrate this point.

*My first wife had given birth to girls only, we had six girls. My wish was to have sons who would carry the family name, so I took another wife who also gave birth to five daughters. The second marriage did not solve my problem. It even worsened my situation (Simon)*

*I did not plan to have a second marriage. It was all a mistake. We were just having a fling then she fell pregnant.(Peter)*

*I was staying with my sister in-law and my wife was in hospital for a very long time. I impregnated her. I was left with no choice but to marry her. (Albert)*

*I met my second wife when I was working for a certain mining company while my first wife was staying at our rural home. I fell in love with her and decided to marry her. Now I regret my decision (John)*

*My first wife failed to give me a son, my second wife again could not give me a son .I then married a third wife who has provided me with two sons( Richard)*

*I had problems with my first wife, and then I decide to marry another wife. My second wife is so good.I have no regrets (Gilbert)*

From the above accounts it is clear that the participants had different reasons for being in polygamous marriages. Some like Gilbert, John, Richard and Simon planned to have polygamous marriages while others like Albert and Peter did not plan to have many wives but found themselves in polygamous marriages. For Peter and Albert the decision to take a second wife was accidental, therefore they did not seek the consent of their wives to take second wives. Their second marriages were just by accident and their wives had no option but to accept it. For John, Simon, Richard and Gilbert, their second marriages were also a surprise to their wives. Although they planned to marry second/third wives they could not seek consent from their wives the assumption being that they were not going to agree with them.

## **Do Your Wives Give You Problems?**

The majority of the participants indicated that their marriages were characterised by fights, tension and hatred among co-wives.

*The major challenge I have is on resource allocation .No matter how I try to share the resources equally and fairly, my wives are never satisfied. They always accuse me of favouritism. However although they fight amongst themselves, I have no problem with them myself. I relate with all of them well. (Richard)*

*My wives are always fighting and insulting each other over silly things. Now I have hypertension .At one time I had to leave my home and went to stay with my sister so that my hypertension would stabilise. (Simon)*

*With my first wife, things never worked out for us. Now because I married another wife, she is jealousy. With my second wife things are really good for us. She has given me the joy I had dreamt of. (Gilbert)*

*Although my wives live in separate households, they always shout and scream at each other whenever they get the chance to do so. This has also created tension even among the children (John)*

From the above accounts, it is clear that the husbands were not happy in their marriages. Their wives did not get along with each other. More so the fights and tensions were a source of stress for their husbands. To make matters worse children were also caught up in the fights. However, for Richard and Gilbert polygamy gave them the happiness they wanted in their lives.

## **Do Your Children Give You Problems?**

Most of the participants reported having negative relationships with their children. The following excerpts capture these negative relationships:

*My relationship with my older children is not good, when they were youngthey were influenced by their mothers to hate me. They were evenafraid of me. Whenever I visited their mothers they would try as much aspossible to avoid me. Now they are old enough to decide for themselves butit is too late for me to win their favour. (Simon)*

*My children are still young and they are afraid of me. May be it's because they are influenced by their mothers. Whenever I try to get close to them they always avoid me and I feel like a monster. (Peter)*

*When my children were still young they used to team up with their mothers against me. Now that they are married and no longer stay with me our relationship has improved. They take care of me. They sometimes visit with their husbands and children. They no longer take sides when their mothers are shouting and insulting each other. (Richard)*

*Children are a burden to me. I do not have patience with them. They are always demanding this and that. I think they are sent by their mothers to demand things from me because they feel that I neglect them and their children. (Albert)*

*I love all my children and they respect me. We have a good relationship. (Gilbert)*

The responses by participants showed that their relationships with children were characterised by conflict and their children were afraid of them. Most of the participants attributed the negative relationships they had with their children to the influence of their wives. They believe that their wives are responsible for estranged relationship that they had with their children. Fortunately for Simon he had a chance to mend his relationship with his children when they grew up. This can be attributed to the fact that these children no longer depend on their father for financial upkeep. They are now in a position to take care of themselves as well as their parents. Gilbert was also a happy man who had a good relationship with his children.

### **Do You Enjoy Your Marriage?**

It does appear from the accounts given below that most of the participants were not happy with their marriages. All of them except for Richard and Gilbert regarded their second/third marriages as one of the mistakes they had made in life and cannot be reversed. They had learnt to accept and live with their mistakes for the sake of their children.

*All things were ok until I impregnated my sister in law. Since then I haven't known peace in this place. If they are not fighting among themselves, they are busy insulting me (Albert)*



*This was the gravest mistake of my life. Before I married my second wife, I used to enjoy my marriage. It all started when I married my second wife. They both wanted to stay with me in the mining compound where I was working. The house was too small and could not accommodate both of them and their children. None of them cared about our rural home. My salary was too little and I ended up resigning and relocated to our rural home where we are today. (John)*

*I was happy with my first wife but she could not give me a son. My parents influenced me to take a second wife. She also gave birth to five daughters. This has made my life difficult financially and emotionally. Now I have hypertension. The doctor said the fights and insults are not good for my health (Simon)*

Although most participants reported that they did not enjoy their marriages, there were few who said that marrying another wife helped them realise their wishes in life.

*Although there are a lot of conflicts in my family, am I happy that finally my third wife gave me two sons. I also wanted a son who would be called by my name and God granted my wish. I therefore do not regret marrying three wives because I found what I was looking for. (Richard)*

*With my first wife things did not work out. However my second wife is the best gift that God has ever given me. (Gilbert)*

The extracts above provide information to the fact that most of the participants were happy with their first wives. Before being engaged in polygamy they enjoyed their lives. However with the coming of another wife into the family their lives became sour. Problems encountered include but not limited to financial problems, conflicts, emotional, verbal insults, physical fighting and sicknesses. Fortunately, for Gilbert and Richard polygamy has brought happiness to them. Gilbert has found marital satisfaction in his second in his second marriage.

### **Will You Recommend Polygamy to Other People?**

The responses from participants indicated that polygamy is burdensome. This is captured in the Shona proverb *Barika moto unopisa* (Polygamy is fire it will burn you). All the participants did not recommend other people who are not in polygamous marriages to marry more wives. Even the few participants who reported some positive experiences did not recommend polygamy as a solution to marital problems. The major challenge mentioned by the participants was that a big family is more demanding financially. Wives and children need clothes and food.

The children also require other social services like going to school, medication and attention which may be difficult for a man to provide for a big family. More over the participants highlighted lack of peace in the home due to fights, conflicts, jealousy and insults as wives compete for husband's favour.

*Even for monogamous marriage life is just expensive. What more if you have two wives and eleven children like myself. (Peter)*

*Wives are stressing, they always fight and quarrel over silly things. It is better to stay with one wife, even if she is barren. More so, more wives means more mouths to feed (Simon)*

*It is better to have one wife; two women are difficult to satisfy. Even if you treat them equally, they always compete for affection and love from you. (John)*

*I do not encourage other people to do like what I did. Many wives do not give a man peace. They will influence your children to team up against you. Each one of them feels the other one is most favoured. Women are never satisfied. (Richard)*

From the above extracts the participants agreed that polygamy was quite challenging and stressful therefore they did not advise other men to enter into polygamous marriages. The participants highlighted that it is difficult for a man to be able to satisfy the needs of more than one wife. They recommended that it is better for men to stick to one wife. The more wives a man has the bigger the economic burden he has to carry. More so co-wives usually fight and insult each other, thereby causing disunity and sadness in the family.

## **Discussion**

The study sought to investigate the experiences of Shona men in polygamous marriages in Ward four of Chivi District, Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe. The results of this study show that men enter into polygamous marriages for different reasons. For some, it was out of love. The foregoing reason was also reported in earlier studies by Slonim - Nevo and Al-Krenawi (2006) among the Bedouin Arab society in a town in the south of Israel. It was not common among the Shona people to enter into a polygamous marriage just for love. Traditionally among the Shona people, polygamy was a solution to social, economic and political challenges of the day (Grand & Mazuru, 2011). For others it was as a result of social pressure and the desire to increase their chances for a son. This finding is also consistent with existing literature. For instance, it has been reported that in most African societies the boy child is preferred to the girl child (Kyomo & Selvan, 2004).

In Shona culture, the reason being that they carry their family name to next generations through procreation. Mawere and Mawere (2010) argue that through procreation, the family name is perpetuated and the link between ancestors and the living is assured. Without children, therefore, the family genealogy and identity ultimately die off. That being the case among the Shona people, polygamy was justified in the event that one's wife was barren or had failed to produce sons. More so sons were important among the Shona people because they would take care of their parents when they grow old (Gelfand, 1973).

From the results it is also evident that most men did not seek the consent of their wives to take another wife. Wives would discover their husband's second or third marriage after some years. This is contrary to what is expected in Shona culture where a man who intends to marry another wife is expected to ask for approval from his wife or wives. Gelfand (1973; 176) argues that among the Shona people if a man is expected to marry another wife, he will have to obtain prior approval from his wife/ wives for him to do so. More so Bourdillion (1987) argues that in traditional Shona society, a man was supposed to keep his wife informed of his extra marital relations and failure to do so was regarded as dangerous to the children. However, in modern day Zimbabwe, under the Customary Law, a man is not obliged to inform his wife of his intention to marry, neither is he obliged to request the consent of his wife or wives before marrying another woman. This leaves women at the mercy of their husbands.

From the results obtained in this study, it is evident that most husbands in polygamous families do not have good relationships with their wives. In fact, they reported being unhappy in their marriages. More so from the results it is evident that husbands in polygamous marriages considered it to be a stressful experience which is full of social and financial challenges. Similarly in traditional Shona society Makaudze (2015) reported that because of the challenges that are associated with polygamy, it was meant for rich and the elderly members of the society had who had the means to fend for large families that polygamy produced. Similar results were found by Esmaili, Sadrpushan and Gorji (2012) who carried out a study among the Muslims of Sistan and Baluchestan reported that polygamy is stressful because of the large family it produces, more so they are disputes and competition among women. They also reported that at times women may engage in physical conflicts between them. This is evidence to show that the problems that men confront in polygamy know no boundaries. The same problems reported among the Shona people are also found in Muslims communities.

More importantly, the results revealed that most men in polygamous marriages regret their situation but they cannot reverse it. Most of them did not recommend polygamy to any man who is single or in a monogamous marriage. More so they do not wish for their children to enter into polygamous marriages. Similar results were reported by Slonim-Nevo et al., (2008) who carried out a study in Israel and reported that men in polygamous marriages expressed the desire that their children avoid it. This scenario reveals that polygamy is a challenging experience for men which should be avoided.

Traditionally the Shona people acknowledged the challenges of polygamy hence the Shona adage which says *Barika moto unopisa* (polygamy is a challenging experience). This adage was meant to conscientise the Shona people about the problems and challenges of polygamy such that those who opt for it did so with full knowledge of the risks that they are taking (Makaudze, 2015).

From the findings of this study polygamy is associated with a number of negative experiences that men face such as sicknesses, stress, loneliness, economic burden, insults from wives and children as well as unhappy marriages. This can be attributed to the fact that their wives have no say to the addition of another wife into the family. In traditional Shona society a wife would in most cases recommend her husband to marry his own sister. Such a move would minimise chances of quarrelling between the two wives (Grand & Mazuru, 2011). Absence of quarrels in the home meant that the husband would be at peace with his wives. However, studies conducted elsewhere reveal that men are the perpetrators of abuse in polygamous marriages rather than victims (Gumani & Sodi, 2009, Al-Sharfin et al., 2015; Daud et al., 2014 and Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001). This discrepancy can be attributed to the gender of the participants especially given the fact that the key informants in the above mentioned studies were women. On one hand wives are likely to report negative experiences at the hands of their husbands while on the other hand husbands are likely to report negative experiences perpetrated at them by their wives.

More importantly, this study also reveals that men can also open up and talk about their suffering in polygamous marriages. This is contrary to what was reported by Esmaili et al (2012) among Muslim communities who argue that men pretend that being in polygamy has no negative effect in them. They also found out that men hid their physical pain, non- satisfaction and their need to medical therapy.

## **Conclusions**

Judging from the responses which were given by the participants in this study, polygamy is a stressful experience. Most husbands in polygamous families had strained relationships with their wives and children. In conclusion, this study found out that polygamy expose men to painful and stressful experiences and yet society perceives them as perpetrators of abuse in polygamous marriages.

## Recommendations

Since husbands also experience physical, emotional and psychological abuse in polygamous marriages, this study therefore recommends that support groups which normally focus on helping women and children leaving men to carry their burden alone should include men in their programmes. Counselling service providers should introduce programmes that support and cater for the needs of males in polygamy especially given the fact that polygamy is a common type of marriage in many countries across the globe. Support groups should not only focus on the needs of women and children but should also include the needs of men so as to build sustainable homes.

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