

Factors Related to the Marital Satisfaction of  
Malian Women in Polygamous Marriages

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In anthropological research, polygamy is typically defined as “a marital relationship involving multiple wives” (Kottak, 1978 cited in Low, 1988, p. 189). The term polygamy, however, includes three different types of relationships. The first, polygynandry, is characterized by a group marriage in which multiple wives are married to multiple husbands, while the second, polyandry, refers to a wife married to two or more husbands. The third form, and that which is explored in this study, is polygyny. Hereafter referred to as polygamy, it is the marriage of one husband to two or more wives and is the most common form worldwide. (Valsiner, 1989 cited in Al-Krenawi & Graham, 1999).

Numerous studies regarding polygamy have focused on its advantages and disadvantages relative to monogamy. Al-Krenawi and Graham (2006) found that Bedouin-Arab women in polygamous marriages had more psychological problems than those in monogamous marriages, and other studies of Palestinian women report similar findings (Al-Krenawi, Graham, & Izzeldin, 2001; Al-Krenawi, 2001). Gwanfogbe, Schumm, Smith, and Furrow (1997) further examined women in polygamous marriages, this time in Cameroon. They found that marital satisfaction for women was variable based on husband supportiveness, maternal employment, and age of the husband. While researchers have explored the situation of women in Palestine, Cameroon, and multiple other countries, the polygamous relationships of women in Mali had not yet been adequately explored. This investigation fills this gap in the literature by focusing on the

marital satisfaction of Malian women in polygamous marriages and the factors that are associated with it.

### Context

#### *The Institution of Polygamy in Mali*

Understanding the perceptions of women in polygamous marriages cannot be done without first understanding polygamy's place in the society at large. In Mali, polygamy is commonplace. According to the country's National Bureau of Statistics, 44% of married Malian women live in polygamous unions, giving Mali one of the highest polygamy rates in the world (Madhavan, 2002). Furthermore, the Association pour le Progrès et la Développement en des Droits des Femmes Maliennes (A.P.D.F.), estimates that the actual percentage is much higher considering the number of monogamous marriages that years later become polygamous (Equality Now, 2003). With so many people involved in polygamous unions, polygamy is extremely visible and widely accepted throughout the country.

Polygamy is not only socially and culturally acceptable in Mali, but legally acceptable as well. When a husband and wife enter a civil marriage, they record their "matrimonial opinion" as either polygamy or monogamy (N. Keita, personal communication, October 15, 2008). While noting polygamy does not require a husband to take a subsequent wife, the Marriage and Guardianship Code allows those who opt for polygamy to take up to four wives. The code also gives women certain other rights, including some regarding property and divorce<sup>1</sup> (cited in Equality Now, 2003). Because

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that some parts of the Marriage and Guardianship Code are not strictly enforced and are often completely ignored, as was the case for a study participant who was one of five co-wives.

civil law clearly sanctions polygamy and protects the rights of those who enter into such a union, it further solidifies polygamy as an acceptable institution.

While civil law governs the country, Islamic law is also an important societal framework with over 90% of Malians identifying as Muslim (Koktvedgaard Zeitzen, 2008). With regards to polygamy, the Qur'an explicitly says, "And if you fear that you cannot act equitably towards orphans, then marry such women as seem good to you, two or three or four; but if you fear that you will not do justice (between them), then (marry) only one or what your right hands possess; this is more proper, that you may not deviate from the right course" (4:3). Polygamy was initially permitted in Islam, not because men wanted more than one wife, but as a means of protecting widows and orphans left behind by war. "The alternative is continual and increased prostitution, concubinage, and distressing spinsterhood," the Islamic Publications Committee in Nigeria explains (1983, p. 37). These beliefs form the basis of support for polygamy in the Muslim community.

#### *Malian Polygamy in Practice*

Because it garners support from cultural, government, and religious institutions polygamy is widely accepted and practiced in Mali. The larger community's positive perception of polygamy as an institution has a sizeable impact on the perceptions of the women involved in this study, thus it is important to understand polygamy's context in Mali on a large scale. In addition, it is important to consider three aspects of polygamous life that affect the people themselves. The motives for polygamous unions, the living arrangements of the families, and the task distribution of the co-wives all give great insight into polygamous life in Mali as the women in this study practice it on a daily basis.

Initially, a decision between polygamy and monogamy must of course be made. In almost all cases, the husband is responsible for making the decision to marry a subsequent wife due to the patriarchal nature of the society. Preceding wives who resist are often subject to pressure and/or violence and women who enter into marriage as a subsequent wife often do so on the basis that is better to be in any kind of marriage than none at all (Equality Now, 2003; Slonim-Nevo & Al-Krenawi, 2006). Husbands might take subsequent wives for a wide variety reasons. For some, polygamy can be economically advantageous as it can provide a joint system of labor (Bingham & Hill, 1982). This reasoning is especially common in rural settings where agriculture is more prevalent. In urban areas like the one examined in this study, however, men tend to choose polygamy for different reasons. Some choose it simply because they are wealthy enough to support multiple wives, using polygamy as a status symbol (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 1999). This was the case of at least one of the project participants. In another participant's case, a husband took two subsequent wives after his older brother, the wives' previous husband, had died. Others were simply dissatisfied with the first wife but did not want a divorce. In an urban setting, the reasons for choosing polygamy over monogamy are greatly varied and frequently complex.

Like the motives for polygamy, the families' living arrangements are extremely diverse. Some co-wives live apart with the husband traveling back and forth between the two homes. The two homes are often in close proximity to each other, and the wives occasionally pay each other visits. Others, while technically still married, are living completely independently of their husbands and co-wives, having been forced out of the home after the arrival of a new co-wife. These women live with and are dependant on

either their parents or their grown children. Most women in this study, however, reported that they live together with a co-wife or co-wives and a husband. Each wife has a separate room, and in some cases, the husband also has a separate room. The children live in the compound together, as well. Regardless of the situation, living arrangements profoundly affect the experiences of a wife in a polygamous marriage.

While less varied than living arrangements, the system for division of household tasks is just as important. Co-wives in many Malian polygamous marriages use a system of chore rotation. In this investigation, every participant reported that she and her co-wife or co-wives use a two-day rotation based on meal preparation. For two days, one wife is expected to make all of the food for the entire family, and on these days, she is also given the conjugal responsibilities. In addition, some families also expect the same wife to sweep, clean, wash clothes, and go the market on her scheduled days. The responsibilities shift after two days, and the cycle continues with the next wife. This system of chore rotation plays an important role in the way in which polygamous marriages operate on a daily basis and thus should be considered when examining factors related to women's marital satisfaction.

## Method

### *Sample*

In order to examine how women in these circumstances form perceptions of their marriages, a multidimensional investigation was designed. The study took place in Mali's capital, Bamako, in a large residential quarter on the south side of the city called Kalaban Coura. The academic advisor, herself a Kalaban Coura resident, referred each of the 12 women involved in the study. Nine women were in polygamous marriages at the time of

the study, and three women were widows but had been in polygamous marriages. All identified as Muslim. Five of the women were primarily housewives, four were involved in small commerce<sup>2</sup>, and three had formal occupations outside of the home. The average age of the women was 45, the average number of co-wives was 1.58, the average age at marriage was 17.4, and the average number of living children was 4.25.

### *Procedure*

After being referred, the women were invited to Mme Keita's home to participate in the study. The research was conducted outside of the participant's home to allow her to freely discuss her co-wife or co-wives and her husband who might otherwise have been within earshot. The only exception to this was a participant who was physically incapable of leaving her home. Mme Keita's home was within a quarter mile of all participants and each had visited the home at least once before the study, making it both an easily accessible and comfortable interview environment. Upon arriving at the home, a consent form was read aloud to women who were competent in spoken French and translated orally for the women who spoke only Bambara. Each participant gave written consent.

The interview itself consisted of two segments. First, the ENRICH marital satisfaction (EMS) scale was used to measure marital adjustment and overall satisfaction with the relationship (Fowers & Olson, 1993). It was administered with the intention of establishing a basis for quantitative comparison among the participants. Fowers and Olson reported high degrees of reliability and validity for the EMS scale, and it also proved to be accurate cross-culturally for Bedouin-Arab women in polygamous marriages (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2006). This 15-item questionnaire was translated in writing into

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this study, small commerce is defined as the informal marketing of small goods, such as crafts, food, or household items, for personal profit.

French and orally into Bambara, and it used a Likert scale ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). Ten items surveyed different domains of marital quality, while the remaining five items made up an idealistic distortion scale designed to correct the tendency to rate one's marriage in an overly positive manner. Because the women were either illiterate or semi-literate, the questionnaire was read aloud and the participants' responses were recorded.

The second portion of the process involved an in-depth semistructured interview. The goal of this segment was to explore how polygamous marriages function on a daily basis and the major factors affecting women's perceptions of their marriages. Initially, the questions were purposefully broad, allowing for exploratory analysis. They covered a variety of topics, including task distribution, childrearing, the co-wife relationship, and the husband relationship. Each participant was also asked to describe their marital satisfaction as well as their view of polygamy as an institution. As data emerged, constant comparative analysis revealed patterns that were investigated in later interviews by more specific questions. These additional questions involved perceptions of women's roles, perceptions of the purpose of marriage, and topics of conversations between wives. Data was coded and translated into a working hypothesis based on the observed patterns and was continuously refined to accommodate new findings.

### Findings and Analysis

In the first portion of the investigation as determined by the EMS scale, the mean marital satisfaction score was 56.05 with a standard deviation of 11.7. Tables 1 and 2 in the appendix show more detailed analyses of the results. As previously stated, the EMS scale was originally intended to provide a quantitative baseline of marital satisfaction that

would be compared to the qualitative interview data. This became difficult, however, when many of the participant's scores appeared to be incongruent with their qualitative assessment of marital satisfaction later in the interview. For example, Aïda N'Diaye's<sup>3</sup> EMS score was 77.6, the highest in the sample, but she reported that she was not happy and frequently regretted her marriage. Jolie Doumbia, Adam Coulibaly, and Fanta Traoré, however, all reported that they were very satisfied with their marriages, but earned EMS scores 15-20 points lower than Aïda's. Furthermore, several patterns of behavior and thought emerged when considering the marriages as the women described them in the qualitative interview, while using the EMS scores as a basis for comparison resulted in little to no pattern.

There are several potential explanations for the seemingly unreliable EMS scores. First, the participants could not complete the interviews privately because they were all either illiterate or semi-literate and needed to have the statements read aloud and the responses recorded for them. This greatly increased the likelihood that participants' responses were skewed to be socially desirable. Second, in all but two cases, Mme Keita translated the survey orally into Bambara for the participants. Because Bambara has a relatively limited vocabulary compared to French and English, it is probable that the resulting statements were very different from their original English and subject to misinterpretation. Finally, cultural norms posed a problem. Malians do not traditionally think of ideas abstractly in terms of a rating system, making the Likert scale potentially difficult for them to understand and apply. Additionally, despite efforts to tailor the scale to cultural norms, some questions were undoubtedly still confusing from the Malian

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<sup>3</sup> All participants' names have been changed to protect their identities.

perspective. With so many potential problem areas, it is understandable and perhaps even unpreventable that the resulting EMS scores were somewhat unreliable.

While the EMS scores appeared random at times, the qualitative responses in the second portion seemed to more accurately reflect the participants' general perceptions of their marriages. Furthermore, the interview items' were very similar to the three items on the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale, which usually yields reliabilities at 0.90 or above (Gwanfogbe et al., 1997). When these more reliable responses were compared to the other data, several psychosocial patterns became evident. These patterns showed the moderating effects of different factors on marital satisfaction. Three themes in particular seemed to be related to a woman's perceptions of her marriage: specific behaviors of her husband, the nature of her relationship with her co-wife or co-wives, and her own expectations about marriage.

#### *Husband's Behavior*

The husband's behavior indisputably plays a large role in how any woman views her marriage, polygamous or not. In a male-dominant society like Mali's, male behavior is even more important because most women have little power to affect change in the relationship. One participant explained, "Although the man does bad things, I, the wife, am obligated to respect the husband." In the cases of the women in this study, two specific behaviors were most closely linked to the level of satisfaction with the marriage. Verbal and/or physical abuse and preferential treatment of one wife over another are two potential husband behaviors that showed a particularly strong moderating affect on women's marital satisfaction.

Marital relationships that are verbally and physically abusive are an unfortunate reality for some Malian women. Aminata Djiré was one of these. Now a widow, Aminata entered into an arranged marriage as the first wife at the age of 23. She was relatively content for some time, but after several years, her husband became both verbally and physically abusive. She described her situation: “I was the hated wife. That...really affects a woman.” Aminata was particularly critical of her husband, stating that her husband was the cause of all of the problems in her marriage. Two other participants alluded to either verbal or physical abuse in their marriages, and reported that their poor relationships with their husband left them less satisfied with their marriage. The presence of abuse in a marriage had a consistently negative link to the ways in which women viewed their marriages.

Another husband behavior that was a commonly noted factor was the preferential treatment of one wife over another. For Tako Diop who was lucky enough to be the favored wife, the special treatment she received was welcome, and she was happy with her husband. Some other wives, however, were not so fortunate. Both Ramata Sidibé and Kadiatou Camara reported that they were unhappy because their husbands preferred other wives and gave those wives special treatment. During arguments with the favored co-wife, Ramata’s husband reportedly supported the co-wife without fail, even when Ramata was clearly right. In Kadiatou’s case, the husband secretly gave gifts to his preferred co-wife. This behavior was a major complaint for both women, and each reported decreased marital satisfaction. Thus for all three women, the husband’s preferential treatment was related to their perceptions of the marriage as positive or negative depending on their status with their husbands.

*Co-Wife Relationship*

In addition to the husband's behavior, the relationship between co-wives has a notable link with marital satisfaction. The nature of the co-wife relationship has long been thought to vary widely among polygamous couples, with some being competitive and some more cooperative (Madhavan, 2001; Madhavan, 2002). The women featured in this study described co-wife relationships that incorporated both competitive and cooperative aspects simultaneously. The amount of jealousy, the level of trust, and the overall interdependence or independence of the co-wives were strongly associated with the participant's perception of the quality of the co-wife relationship and consequently their perceptions of their marriages.

Jealousy of a co-wife was a common theme for many of the women. Aminata Djiré remarked that "naturally" she was jealous of her co-wife. Most often, the number of children, especially sons, and the amount of attention from the husband were sources of envy for the women. Lala Diarra complained about sharing her husband on a rotation. "Two days [with one], two days [with another]. It's bad." Women who reported being frequently jealous of their co-wives also tended to report that their co-wife relationships and overall marriages were less satisfying. Conversely, women who reported indifference toward their co-wives' children and the attention the co-wife received from the husband reported higher satisfaction with co-wife relationships. Clearly, the level of jealousy between co-wives was indirectly related to the perceived quality of the co-wife relationship and thus the perceived quality of the marriage overall.

Additionally, the level of trust between co-wives was an important factor. Bolo Koné reported a particularly low level of trust between her and her co-wife. During

meals, they sat together and talked, but never about the husband for fear that one wife would purposefully tell the husband what the other had said. When asked about her satisfaction with the co-wife relationship, Bolo admitted to being rather unhappy with that aspect of her marriage. Other participants, however, reported relatively high levels of trust and also higher levels of satisfaction with the co-wife relationship. For these Malian women, the level of trust in the co-wife relationship was directly related to the satisfaction with their co-wife relationship and thus their overall marital satisfaction.

Finally, the level of interdependence of the co-wives was related to their perceptions of the co-wife relationship. Some women, like Aminata Djiré, considered their co-wives as sisters or best friends. “We complemented each other,” she explained. These women often worked closely with their co-wives, sharing advice, helping raise each other’s children, and supporting each other during pregnancy and childbirth. Fatoumata Kanté even said that she and her co-wife work together to overcome difficulties with the husband. She stated, “If you come to an understanding, you can beat the husband. You can raise your children well.” The participants who reported more interdependent co-wife relationships also reported more positive perceptions of their co-wife relationship, thus establishing interdependence, co-wife relationship, and overall marital satisfaction as strongly linked.

#### *Woman’s Expectations*

While the husband’s behavior and the co-wife relationship are clearly associated with marital perceptions, the overall marital satisfaction of the women in this study was most closely tied to the participants’ expectations of marriage. Malian women’s beliefs about marriage are diverse. They are shaped by a variety of factors, ranging from the

patriarchy of traditional Malian society to the woman-empowering ideals of the West portrayed in the media. In this study, differences were especially notable in women's beliefs about the purpose of marriage and the role of the woman in a marital relationship, and these expectations were strongly associated with their perceptions of their marriages.

Participants frequently spoke about the purpose of marriage and how they defined a successful marriage. For many women, the only goal of marriage was having and raising children. Oumou Keita, for example, lived in a village with her husband and co-wife before her husband forced her to move out. Now she lives with her grown children in the city. Despite describing both her relationship with her husband and her relationship with her co-wife as poor, she maintained that she was satisfied with her marriage because she successfully raised children. "All of my hope is my children," she said. There were other similar cases throughout the study where women were satisfied with their marriage because they raised children, regardless of their relationships with anyone else in the marriage. Clearly, the beliefs about the purpose of marriage were deeply connected to women's marital satisfaction.

The beliefs about the woman's role in a marriage described by the participants were also deeply connected to marital satisfaction. Some women described their role as one where they simply obeyed the husband. Over half of the women interviewed mentioned that they were obligated to accept some aspect of the relationship that they did not like. Agna Sissoko justified this philosophy, "That's always the way it's been in Africa. That's just the way it is." Like others, Agna argued that she wasn't dissatisfied with her marriage because her submissive role was as it should be. Conversely, Aminata Djiré was not satisfied being submissive. She was frustrated by her lack of control,

particularly over the family's finances. Women like Aminata who went into their marriages expecting to have some control tended to rate their marriages more negatively than women who anticipated being subservient. Expectations about a woman's role in a marriage were undoubtedly related to the participant's marital satisfaction.

### Conclusion

By extensively investigating these women's perceptions of their marriages, this study has developed important theory explaining the various unique factors that are connected with marital satisfaction for Malian women in polygamous unions. First, some husbands' behavior, specifically abuse or the preferential treatment of one wife, were tied to marital satisfaction. In addition, certain aspects of the co-wife relationship, such as jealousy, trust, and interdependence, proved to be linked to perceptions of marital quality. Finally, a woman's expectations about the goals of marriage and her role in the marital relationship were closely associated with levels of marital satisfaction. Understanding of the nature of women's marital perceptions as multifaceted is vital. By recognizing marital satisfaction in polygamous marriages as complex, this project sheds light on the complex nature of polygamy itself.

For decades, researchers have debated the advantages and disadvantages of polygamy for women. Its proponents argue that polygamy offers women opportunities for joint motherhood and shared responsibilities, and may even reduce patriarchy because of the strong bonds it creates between women (Steady, 1987; Leis, 1974; cited in Madhavan, 2002). Conversely, opponents of polygamy argue that it is oppressive and can lead to psychological problems (Al-Krenawi, Graham, & Izzeldin, 2001; Al-Krenawi, 2001). While this study was not intended to either support or criticize the institution of

polygamy, it highlights its complicated nature and reaffirms the need to more thoroughly examine polygamy's effects on women in a multidimensional manner. Hopefully, with a better understanding, researchers will finally answer some of the major questions concerning polygamy and mobilize to help the women who need it most.

## Appendix

*Table 1*

## ENRICH Marital Satisfaction (EMS) Scale Item Analyses

| Content Item<br>(Number in parentheses represents item<br>number in the 15-item questionnaire) | Response<br>Mean |
|--|------------------|
| Personality Issues (2)   | 3.4              |
| Equalitarian Roles (3)   | 4.7              |
| Communication (5)  | 4.2              |
| Conflict Resolution (7)  | 3.8              |
| Financial Management (8)   | 4.0              |
| Leisure Activities (10)  | 3.3              |
| Sexual Relationship (11)   | 4.7              |
| Children and Marriage (12)   | 4.3              |
| Family and Friends (14)  | 4.8              |
| Religious Orientation (15)   | 5.0              |

N=12

*Table 2*

## ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale and Idealistic Distortion Scale Characteristics

| Scale                 | M     | SD   | Range |
|-----------------------|-------|------|-------|
| Marital Satisfaction  | 42.25 | 8.20 | 24-50 |
| Idealistic Distortion | 18.67 | 4.84 | 9-25  |

N=12

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