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**WHEN CULTURE EQUALS FEMICIDE: ‘AFFLUENT
POLYGYNY’ A SOUTH AFRICAN DILEMMA**

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Abstract

Polygyny is still prevalent in South Africa though the country is ravished by the AIDS pandemic. This article aims to highlight the effects of affluent polygyny on South African women. The findings were very much indicative of the dangers of entering into these arrangements because of socio-economic issues and the high rate of unemployment. This dependency causes women to agree to marry already married men for financial stability. Postcolonial feminist scholarship advanced by black women who were subjected to recolonization as their ideas and concepts is the theoretical underpinning for this paper. This theory highlights the complexity of marginalisation of women in affluent polygyny in a previously colonised country. The article asserts that postcolonial feminist theory provides a further understanding of how women suffer at the hands of polygynists. The theory of Gender and Power is also used to understand the gendered relations of affluent polygyny in contemporary times because in African traditional societies, polygyny is perceived as a sociological issue.

Key words: polygyny, postcolonial feminist theory, affluence, HIV/AIDS, gender and power

Introduction

Since the demise of the apartheid in 1994, African people had for the first time tasted the fruit of owning businesses that had been previously reserved for white people only. This change has re-enforced the concept of polygyny for men who can afford to have multiple marriages. Due to cultural evolution, Zulu has seen a rise of ‘affluent polygyny’ in the likes of King Goodwill Zwelithini, the King of the Zulu nation; the former President of the Republic of South Africa,

Mr Jacob Zuma and other affluent and prominent individuals. This kind of polygyny is encouraged by power and the status these men have in the society. They acquire positions they hold and the respect they command because of the money they have. The Zulu proverb '*ubuhle bendoda zinkomo zayo*' (the man's beauty is on how much wealth he has) has influenced many a woman into looking at what the man has before deciding to marry him. The theory of Gender and Power, founded by Sandra Bem in 1981 which explains how individuals become gendered in society, is also used to understand the gendered relations of affluent polygyny in contemporary times because in African traditional societies, polygyny is perceived as a sociological issue (Doi 1996).

Polygyny is still prevalent in South Africa though the country is ravished by the AIDS pandemic. There are specific cultural practices which perpetuate women subordination, exploitation and gender inequality. Most women find themselves in these marital arrangements because of their socio-economic factors like unemployment and low income. This dependency causes women to agree to marry already married men for financial stability. This customary practice contributes immensely to the spreading of the HIV/AIDS virus. Practitioners of polygyny argue that they have the right to practice their culture. They argue that women have a 'choice' of choosing the kind of a marriage they want to get involved in. The risk of contracting HIV for women is also accelerated by the lengthy post-partum sex taboo which means sexual encounters are prohibited during this period. This then gives the husband the 'right' to get another wife and/or a mistress. Postcolonial feminist scholarship advanced by black women who were subjected to recolonization as their ideas and concepts is the theoretical underpinning for this paper. This theory highlights the complexity of marginalisation of women in affluent polygyny in a previously colonised country. The article asserts that postcolonial feminist theory provides a further understanding of how women suffer at the hands of polygynists. The theory of Gender and Power is also used to understand the gendered relations of affluent polygyny in contemporary times because in African traditional societies, polygyny is perceived as a sociological issue.

The patriarch has coercive power over his wives. Coercive power implies that there is an ability to impose penalties for non-compliance (Bass, 1990). According to Hinkin and Schriesheim (1989) coercive power is the ability to administer and/or remove things that the other person does not desire. The polygynist is more likely to rely on coercive power because it is a result of the authoritarian position they have over their wives. This position is given freely to them by culture. *Duncan et al* (1997) conceptualise gender in terms of a hegemonic relationship and found evidence which suggests that those scoring high on authoritarianism were inclined to maintain traditional gender roles and demonstrated a rejection of non-traditional gender-role identity.

An African marriage is not only about two people getting married but rather about the whole family and the society. Within these societies, levirate marriages are highly recommended as they deter the wife from looking for love and sexual gratification elsewhere after the death of her husband. Polygyny is also very important to an African man. It is a sign that he is affluent

and that he can take good care of his family, as this kind of marriage is not for the weak and the faint-hearted. Polygyny is meant to limit the chances of extra-marital affairs and children born out of wedlock. It was also put in place to make sure that a man's name was never forgotten, because at least one of the many wives would bear him a son. From culture emanates the religion that guides an African person.

In his study, Nurrohmah (2003) discovered that nine women in polygynous marriages had suffered abuse. Polygyny creates inequality amongst co-wives since the husband cannot care for and cater to the needs of more than one wife equally (Dangor, 2001). Inequitable treatment of co-wives causes quarrels within the homestead. There is sometimes competition between co-wives to get the affection and attention of their husband (Thobejane, 2014). Polygynous marriages affect children born into such marriages because of the rivalry between co-wives. Polygyny is a worldwide practice amongst Mormons, Muslims, Christians and African traditionalists. This usually happens because of the arrival of a new wife which usually disrupts peaceful and harmonious living. Women remain under the authority of men in their lives because "before marriage, a woman did not have an independent identity. A woman was regarded as the daughter of her father. After marriage she became the wife of her husband" (Kanyoro, 1993). Nowadays like in South Africa, in the eastern Cameroon polygyny is motivated by economic factors. Polygynous supporters claim it makes an "economically stronger family because there are more people working and bringing money into the family" (Thobejane, 2014, p.1062). For polygyny to be completely eliminated in Africa, there has to be an improvement in living standards. Patriarchy and polygyny are deeply rooted in African culture. Thobejane (2014:1065) argues that, "polygyny provides men with access to the sexual, reproductive and other services rendered by several women, while wives in polygynous marriages have to share the material and emotional benefits provided by a single man".

Polygyny clearly marks power relations in societies. Older men have power over women and younger men as they control the lifestyle and decisions within the homestead. Gerontocracy always perceive women as children to be taken care of and controlled. This system also encourages older men to take much younger wives. The age difference together with prestige, power and status renders the gender equity impossible (Crosby 1937). The most important factor of gender relations within polygynous families is that "to most women it implies unequal relations between men and women, as reflected in men's ability to take several wives versus women's one husband" (Zeitzen 2008, p. 125). Co-wives have a specific task of bearing children. The relations between sister wives constitute a very important gender dimension. This may be due to the experiences of the wives, the chief wife enjoying autonomy and junior wives not. The chief wife has special privileges. In rural societies, "there is a general tendency for the number of wives to increase with the age as well as power and prestige of each elder" (Zeitzen 2008, p. 52). Husbands then control wives by labelling them as mere sexual partners and children bearers. Bearing children is an essential component of polygynous marriage for women who want to have a claim on their husband's estate. Co-wives then compete with each other on having more children, male children in particular.

I will also use postcolonial feminist scholarship which is advanced by black women who were subjected to recolonization as their ideas and concepts. This theory highlights the complexity of marginalisation of women in affluent polygyny in a previously colonised country. Postcolonial feminist theory is a direct response to postcolonial theory which tried to obliterate the role of women in the struggle. It stands to resist misrepresentation of women. Postcolonial feminist theory is primarily concerned with the representation of women in once colonised countries. A woman suffers from 'double colonisation' from colonialism and patriarchy. Women have to fight being a subject under both systems where men become oppressors. This theory highlights the attempt by postcolonial theorists for not only obliterating the role of women from the struggle for independence, but also of misrepresenting them in the nationalist discourses.

Gender and Power Relations within Polygynous Families

Polygyny is deeply embedded in gender relations. The unfairness of one man married to many women and the women prohibited to do the same poses a threat to gender equity. Communities need to pay attention to power relations between the patriarch and his wives and their treatment thereof. Women are getting education and more financially independent and perceive polygyny as a form of women subjugation (Zeitzen, 2008). Uneducated and traditional women do not acquire education because of lack and poverty. They get married as a form of escape from dire poverty situations.

Polygyny benefits the husband in terms of diversity of mates, sexual gratification and a big family. The most important factor is the provision for the husband has at any point to go without sex or somebody to take care of him. The wives' sexual needs are not considered as important, be it in the post-partum stage or during menstruation. She is just ignored and only given attention when her husband 'needs' her. It has been argued by many scholars and feminists that polygyny exacerbates sexual exploitation of women. The most important thing in polygyny is the men and their needs and the power to control they have over women.

"For African men, polygyny still has huge prestige value; it creates power over life and of life, and thus remains very important" (Zeitzen 2008, p.136). Co-wives are not allowed to have extra-marital affairs and the husband has to make sure that his wives' fidelity is guaranteed. Polygynous men are commended and applauded for having multiple partners whereas women are labelled as promiscuous, shunned and called names. The husband's economic prowess is important in securing more wives and for him to have power over them.

Polygyny automatically negates women empowerment because it is a system which enforces male dominance and suppresses female voices. A study conducted in Ghana, demonstrated that women and their domestic roles are perceived as replaceable at any time. It also revealed that there are gender inequalities with regards to reproduction and family planning within polygynous families (Agadjanian & Ezeh 2000). A wife's worth and autonomy are determined by a number of factors, which include but is not limited to, her position in the family hierarchy, what her husband considers important about her, whether she has her own space (a separate household). Co-wives are compelled to cooperate with each other because it is believed to

obliterate competition. Jealousies tend to be reduced through the sharing of domestic responsibilities.

Polygyny and Gender Relations

By its nature polygynous setups “reinforce hegemonic notions of gender based on cultural and religious traditions (Mkhize, 2015, p.4). There is vast literature on polygyny and its effect on women and children (Oyefeso & Adegoke 1992; Tabi, 2010; Madhavan, 2002). A study conducted by Ozkan (2006) demonstrated that the common reasons for accepting polygynous marriages were: “cultural obligations; infertility; not giving birth to a son; medical illness; and the husband having had an affair with the junior wives before he married her” (Ozkan, 2006, p. 218).

Polygyny is indeed a gendered phenomenon. In developing societies, where women have been emancipated through education and economic opportunities this practice is becoming less favourable (Zietzen, 2008). This is testimony to the fact that “tradition is fluid; its content is redefined by each generation and its timelessness may be situationally constructed (Linekin, 1983, p. 242). Many scholars have written on the impact of polygyny on women (Al-Krenawi, 1999 Elbedour, 2002) and the impact it has on children (Mkhize 2015). The claim by patriarchs that co-wives consent to their husband taking more wives is an illusory which therefore is no consent (Jonas 2012, p.147). Jonas argued that a decision to get married is taken through and in the context of the value system prevailing in that particular society (Jonas, 2012).

Gender Relations in an African Cultural Context Use Initial Caps

Culture plays an important role in interfacing with the psychodynamics of gender identity (Diamond, 2006, p. 1104). Mkhize (2015, p.33) asserted that, “male power also allows the development of social and interpersonal definitions that devalue women and femininity and strengthen and legitimise the gender system”. This study highlights the disproportional division of household duties which is founded on the assumption that women derive pleasure and fulfilment only from home, husband and children (Lui, 2013, p. 2). These patriarchal patterns subordinate women to men as established in sociological research on different families as well as ideologies of masculine authority that supports it (Connell, 1987 pp. 122-123). Polygyny is perpetuated by patriarchy in traditional societies.

Gender has become an important phenomenon in recent times (Nencel, 2007), because it gives meaning to the social and cultural meaning of masculinity and femininity. Gender should be viewed as a social and socio-cultural construct because it exists within culture-specific realities, because “as gender is a construction, the meaning given to masculinity and femininity is related to culture-specific common-sense and existing social structures in a society, and therefore strongly connected to time and space.” (Poelma & Stuijt 2015, p.16). Gender is the object of power and it can be subject to power relations (Nencel 2007, Scott, 1986).

Placeless-ness of Women in Polygynous Marriages

Polygyny exposes women to the risk of contracting HIV and infringes upon the right to equality and their dignity as human beings. Women are rendered mute when it comes to issues of sex and intimacy. Protection in the form of condoms is not negotiable as it is not part of any sexual encounters in multiple-partnered marriages. The virus can be passed from one partner to another and also encourage re-infection. Virgin brides are put on a pedestal and receive more acceptance from the family and the community. Their bride price (*ilobolo*) is higher than that of a bride who is not. The assumption is that co-wives remain faithful to their husband hence the non-use of condoms during sexual encounters. Affluent polygyny is prevalent in gerontocratic society. Older men become more interesting to younger girls who have not yet realised their dreams.

Dennis cited in Oliello (2005, p.76) is also of the same view that polygamy does not contribute to the spread of HIV/AIDS. He said: "Polygamy is not dangerous, from an AIDS point of view if the man limits his sexual contacts to his wives while wives have no sexual activity outside marriage."

The above argument may be somewhat unfounded, as there is no guarantee that the wives will be faithful to their husband. His absence from home might just push them into the hands of other men which is another disadvantage of polygynous marriage. Trobisch (1971 pp. 31-32) argues that those who address polygyny as an antidote against adultery see only one part of the problem. For once, an inclusive sex-partnership is accepted, the step towards adultery occurs because their husbands usually stay with one wife for a week at a time or with the favourite wife only for a long time. As a result, he is not able to satisfy all of them sexually.

I have reservations believing that parties in polygynous marriages can be faithful and trustworthy. I also do not have faith in the effectiveness of traditional laws and rules surrounding fidelity in marriage. Hellander (1958, p. 21) affirmed this by saying that "today, unfortunately, in the towns and to some extent in the country, the old stability of African marriage has vanished." Polygynists have a great burden of meeting the needs of plural unions. The husband has difficulty to strive to provide an equitable distribution of his love. The relationship between a husband and his wives is always shaky as he sometimes does not have enough time to pay attention to each of them as it should be the case.

In most polygynous cultures, women are regarded as inferior to men and male dominance is the normal culture because the man is the head of the household. Parrinder (1958, p. 35) said:

It is indeed in the rights of women, and the respect for personality, that monogamy has one of its surest justifications. Where there are several wives there is bound to creep in an idea of the inferiority of women, who tend to be regarded as property, or as lower beings.

Kanyoro (2002, p. 5) argued that polygyny is an institution that is oppressive to women and that thrives in a patriarchal culture which is based on the superiority of male persons. She further says that, "polygamy has tended to exploit women and children's labour because polygamy is justified as a means of enhancing productivity of property for the man. Polygamy

also depicts women as weak and needing the constant protection.” Wasike (1992, p.107) also believed that polygyny is oppressive to women.

There has been a deep outcry about what colonial and religious segregation brought by the missionaries did to obliterate African cultural practices. This led to many Africans embracing African Renaissance and interpreting it as a tool to reclaim their heritage. Polygynists are using this to justify their actions. The way they seem to interpret African Renaissance seems to ostracise women and ignore their emotions. African Renaissance is about what was lost by men during apartheid/era of the missionaries during colonialism.

Polygyny “and other cultural practices are as legitimately subject to criticism within the context and setting of human rights as is any other structural aspect of society” (Jonas, 2012:142). From time immemorial, polygyny was embedded into the African culture and primal religion family life. This was shunned by missionaries and the bible they thought with them. It continues to be the “most distinctive feature of African marriage” (Garenne and van de Walle, 1989 p. 267). According to Fanon, (2004 p. 211) polygyny constitutes an assault to women’s rights to equality. The fight for gender equality has been at the centre of evolution post-1945. Polygyny is sometimes used by man to manipulate women into conforming to the men’s demands for the fear of having a younger and more beautiful sister wife. This interferes with women’s self-worth and is used to control women’s assertive self within a marriage (Ross, 2002 p. 24). The general feeling is that polygyny infringes upon women’s rights to be free from discrimination (Cook & Kelly, 2006, p.11). Jonas (2012, p.146) asserted that:

Polygamous marriage contravenes a woman’s right to equality with men and can have such serious emotional and financial consequences for her and her dependants that such marriages ought to be discouraged and prohibited.

The emotional well-being of women in polygynous families is often ignored. The family elders often advise the young wives to persevere and be submissive to their husbands. Cultural evolution has led to many men using culture to have mistresses and children out of wedlock and call that polygyny. Affluent polygynists buy houses, cars and maintain the expensive lifestyles of their mistresses. In most instances the wives do not enjoy the same luxuries as the mistress. Wives are told that they are home builders therefore they should be content with what the husband provides for them. Men get away with this behaviour and the society accepts it. Most women get into these arrangements because of societal pressure to get married and have children. Traditional societies shun unmarried women and call them names. Recently, women aspire to better lives than the ones they currently have, so the emergence of affluent polygyny makes this arrangement financially meaningful to women. This outdated tribal custom has been glorified by the life the former South African President, Jacob Zuma’s wives live –from what we see in the media-. The recent television series, *Uthando nesithembu* (Love and Polygyny) portrayed affluent polygyny as an enticing setup which in the beginning had viewers envying the co-wives.

The Zuma saga

The former President defended his polygynous marriages at the World Economic Forum in Switzerland when he mentioned that “In South Africa we follow a policy that says you must respect the culture of others. Some think their culture is superior to others that’s the problem we have in the world.” This is perceived as a rebellion against Western culture and re-embracing Africanism. His assertion was criticised immensely by the global community. It was felt that as a leader he should have been advocating women’s liberation and independence. It was felt that he was abusing traditional customs to justify his indiscretions. He had a couple of children with different mistresses whilst married. During his rape trial he claimed that he had a shower after ‘sex’ to avoid contracting the AIDS virus. This was evident of the fact that he does not use protection. This put all his sexual partners at risk of contracting the virus. The lifestyle and the status acquired through being first wives and the benefits they receive encourage women to aspire to that kind of life. Zuma’s populism also contributes to women agreeing to this kind of marriage. He is set to marry a 25-year-old young woman soon. He insists that he is rectifying what he says is a mistake made by colonisers, “when the British came to our country, they said everything we are doing was barbaric, was wrong, inferior in whatever way”.

Another reason given by Mr Ndela Ntshangase, an African culturalist from KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa is that there are not enough men for all African women. He insists that women should be willing to share their men because “all men are polygynists”. This seems to suggest that women are at the mercy of these men.

The Mseleku saga

In this patriarchal society polygyny seems to further uplift the status of affluent powerful men. As soon as men acquire wealth they opt for polygyny and flaunt their wealth. This also leads to extra-marital affairs. Polygynists nowadays have adopted a new fashion trend of marrying their co-wives in one ceremony. He becomes a demi-god surrounded by a collection of women. This trend dismisses the individuality of each wife and what she may want for her big day. It becomes about the husband, his family and his customs in total disregard for his wives’ wishes. Culture is used as an excuse to continually undermine women’s rights and benefit men. This becomes a culture of convenience on so many levels. Africanism and African Renaissance has meant replacing one oppressive ‘culture’ with the other. Women are on the receiving end of this and they always have a raw deal.

They also pose for media pictures together. Zuma has been on a number of occasions taken pictures with a group of his spouses. Mseleku has also followed suit in taking group photos with his wives.

The Spectre of HIV/AIDS

Polygyny renders the emancipation invalid since women have no say or choice on sexual matters because of the gender imbalance between the husband and house wives. A polygynist can have as many mistresses as he does wives and that passes on as culture. The existence of AIDS that is ravishing people all over the country seems to have taken a back seat in the minds of polygynists and women who enter these types of marriages. For men polygyny is a power

game and because of the inequalities in the socio-economic sphere women view it as 'insurance' for a financially secure future.

The argument put forward by traditionalists is that colonisers imposed monogamy on the Zulu people. Now they are rectifying that by taking more wives in honour of their 'culture'. Most urban people find it a bit challenging to uphold this cultural practice compared to their rural counterparts, however, it has been replaced by men having permanent mistresses sometimes known to the wife. The feelings of these women are undermined, their rights are infringed upon, all in the quest to prove to colonisers that their culture is not superior to those of the aborigines. That is the most twisted line of reasoning I have ever come across. Oppressing an individual in an attempt to convince your oppressor that you are not oppressed anymore?

Conclusion

Polygyny does not guarantee fidelity for either for men or women. Any member of the group marriage can stray seeking attention and affection elsewhere. The lack of the use of protection within the group marriage means that any member of the group could infect all those involved in that plural sexual relationship. The statistics of HIV positive people in South Africa is shocking, so portraying polygyny as a positive thing raises questions. The prevalence of polygyny is on the rise now that most African men have acquired wealth through businesses post-1994. The opening of doors for Black people to have businesses meant that many of them now have wealth to afford bigger families. To a certain extent, South Africa is thought to be one of the most developed countries in Africa but when it comes to polygyny, we are stuck in the 1900s.

Socio-economic factors in a country like South Africa compels some women to 'agree' to enter these kinds of marriages because

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