

Reasons That Drive Women into Polygynous Unions in Ugenya Sub-County, Kenya

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Abstract

Polygyny is a popular form of marriage practiced in the rural Nyanza region of Kenya despite changes in culture, traditions, availability of critical resources such as land, the cost of living, education, and level of women's empowerment. The objective of this study was to establish the forces that drive women to join such unions. The study was guided by the Systems Theory. The descriptive research design was employed where a sample of 60 participants was drawn from polygynous women using the snowball sampling technique. Data was collected using interview schedules and analyzed using both descriptive statistics and the thematic content analysis technique. Findings reveal that most of women in polygynous unions in Ugenya Sub-County were married as first wives and were not aware that their husband had intention to marry other wives in the future. Others were compelled by cultural factors such as wife inheritance and societal pressure to get married to polygynous men. The study recommends a review of the Marriage Act to make it mandatory for men to involve current wives in decision to marry another wife. Interventions aimed at eliminating negative cultural practices such as wife inheritance are also necessary.

Keywords: Polygyny, wife inheritance, Ugenya Sub-County, Kenya, culture, marriage, women

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1. Introduction

Families can assume different forms and structures. One of the oldest and common family structures is polygyny, which entails one man having many wives (Andersen & Taylor, 2007). It is estimated that over 2 billion women and children around the world live in polygynous unions (United Nations Department of Economic Affairs, 2011). The practice is spread in all parts of the world although at varying rates. In United States, polygyny is still practiced despite being outlawed (Brooks, 2009). A majority of polygynous cases in the United States occur in the state of Utah due to its historical connection to the Mormon religion.

Polygyny is not recognized by law in many parts of Europe including Bulgaria, Germany, and Poland where people who marry more than one wife are punishable by law (Al-Krenawi & Slonim-Nevo, 2008). However, polygyny is still a widespread practice in these countries suggesting the ineffectiveness of legal solution in addressing the issue. In Asia, polygyny is a popular practice mainly due to the dominance of Islam and patriarchal Arab culture. Polygyny is most commonly practiced in Africa than in other parts of the world (Thobejane & Flora, 2014). This form of marriage is legal in 25 African countries including Tanzania, Togo, Ghana, Congo, Chad, Benin, Algeria, and Kenya (Thobejane & Flora, 2014). It is estimated that over a third of married women in Africa are in polygynous marriages (Fenske, 2013).

Kenya passed the Marriage Act of 2014 making Kenya one of the twenty-five African countries to have legalized polygamous marriages particularly polygyny. The Marriage Act of 2014 defines marriage as "the voluntary union of a man and a woman whether in a monogamous or polygamous union registered under the Act," (Republic of Kenya, 2014). However, polygyny is still a popular cultural practice among many communities in Kenya before the enactment of the Marriage Act of 2014 (Karimi, 2014). The 2014 Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (KDHS) showed that 6% of men and 11% of women who were married at the time of the survey were in polygynous unions (KNBS, 2015).

Polygyny is more common in some communities than in others. For instance, one out of every four marriages among members of the Luo communities is polygynous when compared to the national prevalence rate of 13% (Ogunda, 2012). The 2014 KDHS showed that the North Eastern region had the highest prevalence of polygynous unions with 32% of married women being in polygynous union while Nyanza region had the second highest prevalence with 18.6% of married women being in polygynous unions (KNBS, 2015). Nairobi region had the

lowest prevalence at 4.5% followed by Central region at 4.7%, and then the Eastern region at 5.7%. Polygyny was also popular in the rural areas where 14.3% of married were in polygynous union as compared to 7.1% in urban areas of the country.

Despite polygyny being branded as an outdated practice, many women are still drawn into these unions. Empirical literature is ambivalent regarding dynamics that motivates women in this region to enter into polygynous unions. It is in this light that this study sought to examine factors that drive women into polygynous union in Ugenya Sub-County with the view of informing the developing better social policies and program aimed at curbing the practice and improving the standard of living of women living in the area.

2. Literature Review

Women are driven into polygynous unions by a wide range of factors. As Jonas (2012) puts it, a majority of women in polygynous unions do not enter into such unions out of their free will; the decision to get married is made by male figures within their families particularly the father. This claim was supported in the study by Thobejane & Flora, (2014), where it was found that socio-cultural practices were the main reason for polygyny. The study revealed that most African societies follow a patriarchal structure where women do not have decision making authority. Before marriage, all decisions regarding women were made by their fathers while, after marriage, all decision are made by husbands. Ugenya is a partriachal society thus the current study sought to determine whether the existence of patriarchal cultural system plays a major role in women's decision to enter polygynous unions in Ugenya Sub-County.

Perry *et al.* (2014) found that wife inheritance was a popular practice among the Luo community where widows were remarried to their husband's brother upon the passing of their husbands. The inheritor plays the role of the husband including providing emotional and financial as well as companionship and sexual rituals. In essence, the inherited widow becomes an additional wife. This practice is viewed as a way of protecting widows and their offspring, and for controlling the number of women available for marriage (Gunga, 2014). Although these articles suggest the existence of a connection between wife inheritance practice and polygyny, they do not provide empirical evidence to support the existence of wife inheritance as a driver for women to enter polygyny. This study provided the necessary evidence of the existence of a connection between wife inheritance and polygyny in Ugenya.

Recent trends have, however, revealed that there is a cohort of women who enter into polygynous unions freely. Anderson (2010) found that many women in Africa choose polygyny over monogamy even in the absence of pressure from relatives. Poverty was the main reason for polygyny as women chose to get married to the few wealthy men in the community in order to avoid living in poverty, and gain the resource and protection of wealthier men. Chant (2011) argued that since African women have little access or control of productive assets and limited livelihood options, they must accept the default options presented by their society when it comes to marital contracts. Fenske (2013) also noted that even in arranged marriages, there is a significant group of women who seem content to enter polygyny. However, it may be argued that those women who are content to be married to polygynous men do so because they are socialized to believe it's the normal way of life, this study determined that the same can be said about women in polygynous unions in Ugenya.

Many women in Africa do not see any problem in getting married to a polygynous man as this appears to be a norm. According to Jonas (2012), in many parts of Africa, polygyny is not just a marriage of choice, but a value system that inspires and shapes family relations. Like all value system, this practice is deeply entrenched and widely accepted in the African way of life. It is very ordinary for an African woman in the traditional setting to get married to a polygynous man. Anyolo (2010) also noted that, in the African traditional context, polygyny is not just a private arrangement between the couple, but is also a union of two families. Polygyny is used to unite and create bonds between families and clans. A significant gap in these studies is that none of them has focused on polygyny among the Luo community in Kenya. It may be challenging to transfer findings of studies conducted in different cultural contexts to the Luo context. This study determined that polygyny in Ugenya Sub County is a value system that shapes women's decision to marry into polygynous unions.

In their study, Zamambo and Nompumelelo (2015) found that women entered into polygynous unions because of the pressure to meet societal expectations. The study noted that, in the African context, being married and having a family is viewed as a prestigious achievement. Some women are pressured by their families to get married when they reach a certain age. Consequently, many women enter into polygynous unions as an act of desperation to have a higher social standing in the community. The finding is reinforced in another study by Mkhize and Singh (2015) where three out of five interviewees reported that they got married to polygynous men because of societal pressure. Two women reported that they got married because of love. The two studies offers useful insight given that they

were conducted in an African setting, and unlike many previous studies these ones targeted middle-class, educated, and employed women in polygynous unions. This study determined that the same findings are applicable in Kenya, especially in Ugenya Sub County.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The current study was guided by Systems Theory; a general theory that is applied in a variety of disciplines including natural sciences, business, sociology, and nursing among others. This theory was developed to explain how systems work (Jordan, 1998). System theory was first proposed by Ludwig von Bertalanffy, in 1940, when he rejected hypothesis that a system can be broken down into its individual component so that each component can be studied independently and added up in linear fashion to describe the total system (Chen & Stroup, 1993). Von Bertalanffy rejected this hypothesis stating that a system is more than the sum of its components since the interaction between the components is not linear.

Systems theory as proposed by von Bertalanffy was refined and advanced by other scholars. Carel Germain is renowned for pioneering the application of human theory to explain human behaviors and experiences within a social environment (Jordan, 1998). Using system theory, she explained that human behavior as the intersection of the influences of multiple interrelated systems including families, school, workplaces, and larger society. She argued that all systems are interrelated and constitute an order whole. These systems are open entities that interact with their environment, acquire new properties, and evolve. These systems influence human choices and action by shaping people's attitude, beliefs, expectations, and values (Mele, Pels, & Polese, 2016). Using Carel Germain perspective of systems and how they influence human choices as a theoretical framework will offer an understanding of how the dynamics of women in polygynous unions in Ugenya Sub-County can be assessed in the context of socioeconomic, cultural, and other environmental factors.

Systems Theory suggest that, in order to understand factors that drive women to polygynous unions and their experienced, these women should not be assessed in isolation. The study should examine interrelated systems that have shaped and continue to mold their behaviors and way of thinking (Mele, Pels, & Polese, 2016). The study should consider the influence of these women's immediate family, as well as, their larger family and community in which they grew up in, including their rules, norms, and boundaries. It should consider how these systems have shaped the values, beliefs, expectations, and attitude of women in polygynous unions. The theory also suggests that study should consider the influences other systems such as education, religious and cultural, political, economic, and social systems have on the dynamics of women living in polygynous families in Ugenya Sub-County.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed the descriptive design. Descriptive studies focus on examining phenomenon without manipulating variables (Creswell, 2013). It seeks to provide information regarding phenomena as they occur naturally. This design is selected because the objective of the study is to describe factors that drive women to enter into polygynous unions rather than manipulate variables.

3.2 Study Area

Ugenya is one of the six sub-counties that make up Siaya County. It has an area of 310.2 square kilometers and a population of 202,306 as per the 2009 National Census out of which 93,680 are male and 108,626 are female (Kenya Bureau of Statistics, 2011). The Sub-County is further subdivided into four wards namely: West Ugenya, Ukwala, North Ugenya, and East Ugenya. This study area is selected because it is located in a region that has one of the highest polygyny rates in the country (Ogunda, 2012). The researcher also selected the area of study because she was familiar with the culture and language of the people, which helped to minimize language and cultural barriers.

3.3 Target Population

The target population for the study comprises of all married women living in polygynous households in Ugenya Sub-County. A household refers to one or more people living in the same place and sharing meals. This means that co-wives may be considered to be of different households if they do not live together and share meals. There is no official data regarding the number of polygynous households in Ugenya, but according to KNBS (2014), there were 48,105 households in Ugenya. In his study, Ogunda (2012) found that 1 in every 4 households or 25% in Luo Nyanza is polygynous. This rate would translate to 12,026 polygynous households in Ugenya Sub-County.

3.4 Sample Size and Sampling Technique

From the target population, a sample of 60 women was obtained using snowball sampling; a non-probability sampling technique where one participant directs the researcher to another potential subject. It functions as a chain referral technique. After interviewing the initial subject, the researcher asked her to help identify people with similar characteristics. This sampling technique was selected because it allowed the researcher to reach subjects who are difficult to find using other sampling methods by harnessing the power of social networking. This method was also simple, cheap, and did not consume a lot of time. It also helped to delink the researcher from the study by limiting her control over the process of selecting participants.

3.5 Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews. The open-ended nature of the questions enabled the researcher to collect in-depth data because these questions did not limit participants' responses (Gordon, 2015). On the other hand, asking the same set of questions to participants enabled the researcher to compare responses and identify patterns. The researcher agreed with the participants regarding the venue and time for the interview. Each interview session lasted for 30 to 45 minutes depending on the participants' responses. The interview sessions were audio-recorded so as to ensure that all details are captured. The researcher also took notes of observations and thoughts that occur during the interview. Responses to the multiple-choice questions were coded and entered into the Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS) where they were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Responses to the open-ended questions were analyzed using the thematic content analysis technique where key themes were identified and synthesized to establish patterns (Creswell, 2013). The researcher looked for both predetermined themes and emerging themes during the analysis so as to make sense out of them.

4. Results and Discussion

The objective of the study was to investigate reasons that motivate women to enter into polygynous unions. To probe this issue, respondents were asked whether they were aware that they were getting married into a polygynous union.

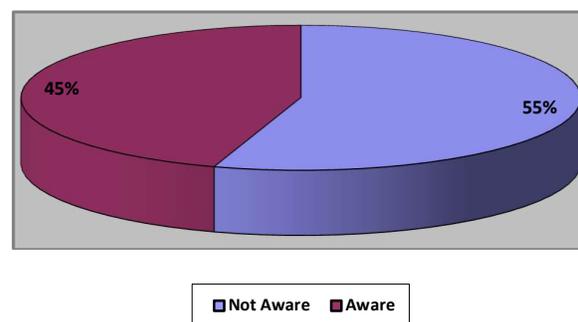


Figure 1: Distribution of Respondents based on whether they were Aware that they were joining a Polygynous Union

Before addressing why women join polygynous unions, it is important to note that some women just found themselves in polygynous unions when their husbands married other women later. This means they did not make the decision but were put into that situation by their husbands. As shown in Figure 1, the majority of the respondents (55%) reported that they did not have prior knowledge that they were joining a polygynous union. Most of these women (72.7%) did not want to be in a polygynous marriage. They were married as the first wives but their husbands married another wife later on. Some of the respondents who reported that they were unaware of their polygynous husband status narrated that their husband lived and worked in another town and that they did not inform them when they married another wife. Others narrated that they were married as second or third wives but their husband did not inform them that he was already married. They came to learn about it later. One of the respondents narrated:

My husband and I do not stay together because he works in Nairobi. I did not know when he married another wife. I only learned about the marriage after they had stayed together for several months and they were expecting (Interviewee18, 34 years old)

Some of the respondents reported that their husband just brought a second wife without having discussed anything

with them. One respondent expressed her disappointment:

I got married when I was very young. We were very happy, but when I gave birth to my third born, my husband brought in another wife. I was very surprised; I wish he could have just informed me so that I can get prepared (Interviewee39, 42 years).

According to this respondent, they were very happy in their marriage and she does not understand why her husband chose to take another wife.

I married my husband when I was only fifteen years old, I met my husband at a church (Legio Maria) where we were worshipping with my parents, and he was the bishop. He said our marriage was predestined by God as God had revealed to him that I was to be his wife, my parents supported the marriage (Interviewee7, 39 years)

4.1 Reason for Getting Married as the Other Wife

The remaining 45% who were aware that they were getting married to a married man gave varying reasons for joining the union. These reasons summarized in Figure 2.

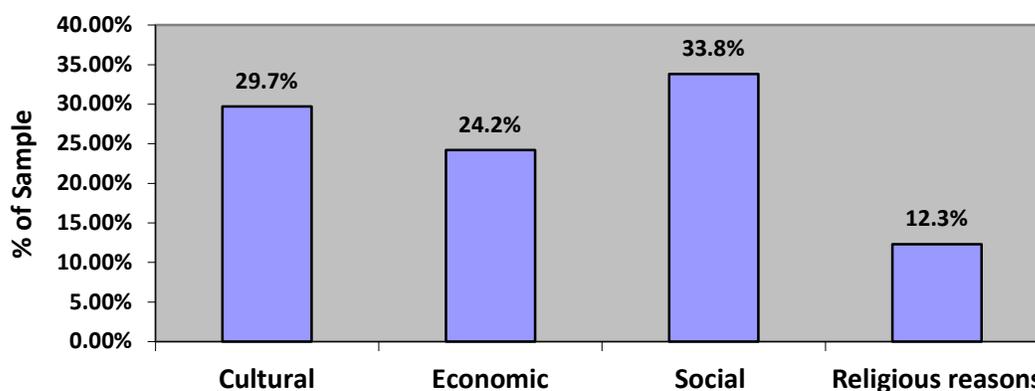


Figure 2: Reasons for Getting Married into a Polygynous Union

4.1.1 Cultural Factors

As shown in Figure 2, culture was a major driver of polygyny in Ugenya Sub-County. About 30% of the respondent reported that their marriages were largely driven by cultural practices. The cultural factors can be summarized into three major practices namely patriarchy, arranged marriages, and wife inheritance.

a. Patriarchy

The main cultural practice that was brought out during the interview was patriarchy, a social system where men hold power and privilege while women are considered to be subordinate to men. This cultural practice is dominant in many African communities while men dominate roles in families, economy, religion, and politics. This system creates structural inequality that gives when little bargaining power when it comes to make decisions on critical issues event in the family setup. The issue of patriarchy emerged during the interviewees where most of the interviewees indicated that they had little say in the decision to get married to a polygynous man. One respondent married her sister's husband after the demise of the sister. She says that she did not have a lot of say on the decision to get married as the husband only talked to her parents and agreed that she should get married to take care of her sister's children.

I got married to my sister's husband after my sister died in order to take care of her children. I did not have a say in this decision; my husband just talked to my parents and they arrived at this decision. I was just informed of the decision. I was given to my husband after my late sister passed on, I came home from school and found my brother in law at home with my parents and some village elders, they informed me that since my sister was dead and she had left behind three children, I was being given to my brother in

law as payment for the dowry paid for my sister; and also that I could help raise my sister's children. It did not matter that my husband had another wife, according to my parents it was customary for me to be given to my husband as the customs of our culture demands (Interviewee55, 45years).

This account highlights how the patriarchal culture where women have a little say over what happens in their lives is still persistent within the study area. This culture has propagated polygynous union by limiting women's involvement in making decisions regarding their own marriages. The relationship between polygyny and patriarchy is cyclical in nature in that they reinforce each other. Once a man marries many wife, the polygynous union increases his bargaining power to the detriment of the wives. If one wife is upset about something, the husband just turns to the other wife instead of trying to understand and resolve the issues troubling her. This situation leaves the women married in polygynous unions with very little voice within the families. Therefore, not only has patriarchy propagated polygyny in the study area, but polygyny has also reinforced patriarchy within the community. Another cultural practice that can be derived from the accounts provided by Interviewee55 is arranged marriage.

b. Arranged Marriages

Arranged marriage is a cultural practice where a man or woman or both are not involved in the selection of their marital partners. The decision is made by other people, mainly the family members. From the findings, it is evident that this cultural practice within the study area mainly disadvantages women as they are the ones who are not involved in the selection of their marital partner. From Interviewee55 account, it has emerged that the marriage was an arrangement between the sister's husband and her family. She was not given the opportunity to decide whether she wanted to get married or not. This is not an isolated case as similar issues were captured during interviews with other women. Another respondent got married to the husband's brother after the demise of her husband as per the custom of the Luo people in the region.

I got married to the brother of my late husband. There was nothing I could do; this is how things have always been done here. When your husband passes away; his brother takes care of you. (Interviewee24, 36 years old).

This respondent was not given little choice with regards to deciding whom she would get married to and when to get married. To that end, the finding highlight how polygyny within the study area may be propagating harmful practices such as underage marriages and forced marriages. The polygynous unions may also lead discontentment among the women as it pays little emphasis on romantic love. This respondent married her brother in law after the death of her husband. Another theme that is brought out from Interviewee24's narration is the culture of wife inheritance.

c. Wife Inheritance

Wife inheritance is a custom that requires a widow to get married to her husband's brother upon the demise of the husband. Traditionally, the culture was meant to ensure that a widow is not left in vulnerable position given the patriarchal nature of the Luo traditional communities where women did not have the right to own property. The custom was meant to ensure that the widow has someone who can provide for her and her children. This tradition has become a primary reason for women get married to polygynous union. In some communities and families, this cultural practice is so embedded that members feel obliged to observe contrary to their own wishes. This seems to be the case in Interviewee24's situations. From her narration, it seems that she believed she was doing the expected thing as the culture of the Luo people expects a woman to be inherited by the brother in law after the death of her husband. This practice was not limited to Interviewee24, another participant reported that

My current husband is actually my brother in law; he married me after my husband passed on. My eldest three children were fathered by my late husband and my last one by my current husband. I married my brother in law as the customs of my culture demands so as to prevent harm 'chira' from my children (Interviewee4, 37 years old).

From the account of the Interviewees 4 and 24, it is evident that the wife inheritance culture could still be playing a major role in propagating polygynous unions within the study area. These two women did not resist because they perceive this practice to be the norm. They were resigned to getting married off without having a lot of say on the matter. They were not surprised that they were married-off to polygynous men. This finding echoes earlier findings that the majority of women in polygynous union in Ugenya Sub-County were raised in polygynous unions. Their parents' polygynous status might have conditioned these women to see polygyny as a norm.

4.1.2 Economic Factors

Economic factors also drive some women into polygynous union. About 24% of the interviewees reported that the

decision to get married to a polygynous man was driven by economic factors. The economic factors can be divided into two major themes namely bride price payment and poverty.

a. Bride Price Payment

Bride price payment is a cultural practice where the groom or his family give property, money or other forms of wealth to the family of the bride. Bride price payment gives legitimacy to the union as it signifies that both the bride's and groom's families have come to an agreement. The nature and amount of bride price vary from case to case. Although this practice was traditionally designed to create strong ties between the bride's and groom's families, it has become so commercialized in modern day marital transactions. Some families view this practice as an opportunity to make money or gain material wealth by marrying-off their daughters to wealthy men. Unfortunately, in most communities, the wealthy men are few and thus many families that wish to marry-off their daughters to gain wealth have no option but to send their daughters to a man who is already married. One respondent reported that the decision to get married was made by the aunt because she (the respondent) was an orphan. She was asked to choose between two men; one already had three wives while the other had one wife. She opted to get married to the man who had one wife.

I was living with my aunt at the time; my parents were dead and my aunt took responsibility for my welfare; she decided to choose a husband for me for she was convinced that having a husband was appropriate for me; she gave me the option of two men, one had three wives the other one wife. I opted for the one with one wife (Interviewee59, 33 years old.)

From the description, it is evident that the aunt was motivated by economic reasons to marry-off her niece. She had already identified two potential partners and the niece was only given the chance to choose between the two. The commercialization of bride price has pushed up the amount demanded by bride's family as bride price, which has consequently make marriage unfordable for young men who are yet to accumulate wealth. Consequently, only the older wealthier men most of whom are already married remain available for families that want to marry-off their daughter for the sake of receiving bride price. Turning the bride payment custom into a purely economic transaction has a negative implication on women. Apart from encouraging polygyny, this trend has diminished the status of women within the communities. The commercialization of bride price has created the impression that women are commodities that can be bought and sold. Once a man pays the bride price, he assumes that he has gained ownership of the wife and can treat him the way he wants. Interviewee 59 account highlights another economic factor that may have motivated the aunt to marry-off her niece to a polygynous man, poverty.

b. Poverty

Poverty is a state of deprivation where an individual or a household is derived one or more basic needs such as shelter, nutrition, education, health, and transportation among others. Poverty is a major problem in rural parts of Nyanza where many families find it difficult to fulfil basic needed. The interview data reveals that the poverty situation has propagated polygyny as some poor family choose to marry-off their daughters to wealthy family in order to improve their economic conditions. Some families marry-off their daughters to wealthy family in exchange for future help with the cost of educating younger children, medical treatment, and food. The families give their daughters to wealthy polygynous men with the expectation of receiving financial or material support. The issue of poverty was captured during the conversation with Interviewee19, who narrated that she was compelled to get married by her father. The husband was friend to the father, and had paid some bride price. The father explained that she had to get married so that the family to get the money needed to educate her siblings.

My father chose my husband for me, the man was his friend and he had paid my bride price, I was informed of the decision after the negotiations has taken place and the bride price had been accepted by my dad. They told me that the needed the money to educate my younger brothers (Interviewee19, 31 years old).

This account highlights how poverty interacts with cultural variables such as pride price payment and gender preference in education to propagate polygyny. It is the pride price payment custom that has made families to consider marrying-off their daughters as means of gaining wealth. If this custom was not present, families would have little incentives to marry-off the daughters. The account by Interviewee19 also indicates that the respondent was married off in order to raise money to educate her brothers. To the family, marrying her off was like a sacrifice that they needed to make in order to get the money to educate her siblings. This account highlights the desperation that family was in due to the poverty situation. It also brings to light the gender preference in education that many families in African tradition communities usually have in favor of boys. When faced with resource constraints, many African families prefer to educate the male child and leave out the female child. This seems to have been the case in Interviewee19's family. Three respondents hinted that the got married to a polygynous man in order to

escape poverty and suffering, and get a better life. For these women, marriage was an avenue to leave the life of poverty behind by getting a man who could take care of their financial and materials needed. The accounts by the three women confirm that not all polygynous marriages that are motivated by economic reason are imposed on the wives by their families. Some women opt to join the union willingly in order to escape poverty.

4.1.3 Social Factors

Some of the interviewed women married into polygynous union freely due to social factors. The social factors in this study can be divided into three major themes namely love, pressure from society to get married, and pregnancy out of wedlock.

a. Love

Polygyny has received negative connotation in modern literature making it difficult to imagine that anyone in his or her right mind could voluntarily decide to enter into a polygynous union for good reasons such as true love. However, current findings show that there are women who choose to get into polygynous unions out of love. About 19% of the respondents said that they got married to a man who they knew had a wife because they fell in love with the man. For these women, their marriages were not arranged by were out of their own volition. One of the respondents narrated that he fell in love with her husband despite knowing very well that the husband had another wife. When the husband proposed to marry her, she did not hesitate because she was in love.

I was a friend to his third wife” one such wife narrated, ‘but when I fell in love with my friend husband, the friendship between us ended. I fell in love with the man because he was hard working and provided for his wives’ (Interviewee48, 36 years old)

Love is often cited as the foundation of marriage. Contrary to popular view, some polygynous unions are founded on love. However, the account provided by Interviewee48 suggests that a major reason that made the respondent fall in love with the man is that he was hardworking and provided for the wife. This description introduces an economic motivation for joining the union. It can be argued that many women tend to fall in love with married men because of the perception that these men have a proven ability to take care of their wives and families. This perception was clearly brought out by interviewee51 who expressed that all good men are married and that it was difficult to get single men with qualities of good husbands.

These days, it is difficult to find a single man who has the qualities that make him a good husband. Most good and responsible men are married thus we have to accept polygyny as an alternative form of marriage. I met my husband 5 years ago and fell in love with him. I was shocked when he told me he was married. We stopped the relationship for several months but the men I dated during that period could not measure up to him. I got back with him and we started seeing each other secretly before he introduced me to his family as the second wife (Interviewee51, 24 years old).

The accounts given by these seven women are a testament that not all women are in polygynous union unwillingly. There are some women who willingly choose to get married into polygynous union.

b. Societal Pressure

Findings also show that there are women who got into polygynous unions due to societal pressure. About 14.7% of the respondent said that they got married into a polygynous union because they felt pressured by friends and relatives. Marriage is considered to be one of the vital phases of life in most African communities. Women who get married and raise a family tend to gain more respect and higher status within communities. This social norm tends to exert a lot of pressure on women especially those who are above 25 years and are unmarried. This seems to have been the case with Interviewee 19, who reported that she married as a result of peer pressure. When her friend got married, she felt left out being the only single woman in the group;

I got married into a polygynous union because I felt pressured. All my friends and age mates had gotten married. It seemed like there was something wrong with me. When my husband approached me, I was glad to accept his proposal (Interviewee19, 45 years old).

For Interviewee19, the pressure to get married emanated from her peers who had all gotten married. She started feeling out of place and was afraid of losing her social circle. For other women, the pressure to get married comes from the families and particularly their parents. In most African communities, the general expectation among parents is that their children will get married and bring fourth grand children. When their children get older, the parents begin to exert pressure on them to bring home husbands or wives. The pressure is often heavier on daughters because it is widely assumed that the widow for getting married and siring children is much narrower for women than for men. While the parents exert pressure on their children to get married out of love and general

concern for their children's wellbeing, this pressure at times causes the children to make wrong decisions. Some rush into marriages with people they barely know while others marry people that they do not love. This was the case with Interviewee29, who disclosed that her parents kept asking her when she was planning to start a family of her own. This pressure pushed her to enter into a polygynous union at the age of 28 years.

I had my first child out of wedlock” reported a participant, “after having my daughter I stayed home for ten years without a spouse and people started pointing fingers at me saying I was cursed and would never get married because I had a child out of wedlock, when my husband approached me with a marriage proposal, I accepted even knowing he had another wife (Interviewee29, 39 years old).

c. Pregnancy out of Wedlock

Some women were compelled to join polygynous union because they got pregnant before getting married. In many African communities, getting children out of wedlock is considered a disgrace for the woman involved and her family. It is also considered inappropriate for a woman to raise children without the support of man. The presence of a father figure during the upbringing of children is valued. Consequently, women who get pregnant out of wedlock are compelled to marry in order to hide the shame and for the sake of the children. Most of the women who find themselves in such situation are married-off to the men who made them pregnant and thus the transition is not so difficult since the two already knew each other. It becomes a problem when the man responsible for the pregnancy is a married man, which implies that the women will have to get married as the second wife. This was the case with Interviewee14, who explained that her relationship with her current husband started as an affair but they had to get married after she got pregnant. She feared societal censure for being a single parent;

I had an affair with my husband when he was still married to his first wife. Unfortunately, we were not using contraceptives thus I got pregnant by him. I had no desire to get married as a second wife but with the pregnancy I felt I had no choice. I was afraid that people would see me as a woman without morals who sires kids out of wedlock. I also knew it would be difficult to get another man who would love my child (Interviewee14, 22 years old).

This respondent illustrated that the fear of societal scorn played an important role in the decision by some women to get married to a married man. To her, the tag of being a second wife was better than the tag of being a single mother. She was also afraid of the responsibility of raising the child on her own.

4.1.4 Religious Reasons

Findings further showed that some women who driven into polygynous unions by religious beliefs. About 12.3% of the respondents reported that they got married into polygynous unions because of their religious beliefs. There are religious beliefs that encourage men to marry men wives. For instance, the Islamic religion allows men to marry up to four wives provided that they are able to love and take care of them. Women who profess this religion thus view polygyny as an acceptable practice. Most of them grew up in polygynous families where their fathers had many wives. This was the case with Interviewee45, who reported that her husband is a Muslim and even though she was a Christian before marriage, she converted to Islam in order to marry her husband

He was a Muslim and I was a Christian, I had heard that Muslim men treated all their wives equally, that their religion demanded such, I knew I would be treated well by my husband and my co wife so, when he asked for my hand in marriage, I accepted (Interviewee45, 43 years old).

Although mainstream Christian Churches discourage polygyny, some sects have come up that encourage this practice. Similarly, many Christian's denominations discourages practices such as divorce and getting children out of wedlock. Consequently, many people choose to start polygynous unions rather than get a divorce or raise children out of wedlock. Another respondent described that he got married to a polygynous man because he was made to believe that it was God's plan for her. According to her, the decision was made by her mother;

My mother chose my husband for me”, reported a respondent, “my husband has the power to heal, he is appointed by God to help fight witchcraft administered through the eye 'sihoho', it was the will of God that manifested itself through my mother when she chose me to marry my husband instead of one of my sisters (Interviewee23, 39 years old).

From this account, it is evident that some women enter polygynous union because they are manipulated using their religious beliefs. In this case, the woman was manipulated by her mother into believing that the marriage was ordered by God. Due to her religious commitment, she did not question the directive.

4.2 Reasons for Remaining with the Marriage despite Husband Marrying another Wife

The study had established that 55% of the interviewee were not aware that they were getting into a polygynous

union at the time that they were getting married. Most of these women were married as first wives only for their husband to bring other wives afterwards. The study sought to establish some of the reasons that compelled these women to remain with their husbands after the introduction of another wife. These reasons can be divided into three major themes namely children, financial reasons, and family values.

4.2.1 For my Children

When asked why they chose to remain with the husband after he brought another wife without their consent, the majority of these women (79.1% of the 55%) said that they decided to remain in their marriages after their husband brought in new wives because they wanted a better future for their children. This finding shows that, for most of the women in polygynous union, marriage is more than just love and attention. To them, marriage is more about upkeep and raising their families. As long as the marriage continues to meet their basic needs and that of their children, they would be willing to live with their husband decisions to marry a second wife. For this respondent, it was more important for her children to have a father than for her to express her dissatisfaction and independence. Although her husband's decision to marry another wife was hurtful, she chose to persevere for the sake of ensuring that her children live close to the father.

I chose to remain with my husband for the sake of my children. I don't want them to grow up without a father. Growing up in their father's house provides them with an identity. No one can question their parentage (Respondent2, 46 years old).

This finding highlights the role the cultural and social norm play in reinforcing polygyny. For this respondent, giving her children an identity was more important than her dignity as a wife and women. She remained with the husband because she did not want her children to grow up without a father and attract ridicule from the society. This is a sacrifice that many women opted to make for the sake of their children.

4.2.2. For financial reasons

About 60% of the respondents who were not aware that they were getting into polygynous union pointed out that they remained married to their husbands for financial reasons as they were unable to care for the needs of their children alone without the aid of their spouses. This echoes earlier findings that indicated that the majority of women in polygynous unions in Ugenya Sub-County did not have income generating activities thus were completely dependent on their husbands' resources. Maybe, their decision could have been different if these women were economically empowered. One such woman reported that;

I have no source of income; my husband is the sole breadwinner in our family. I cannot walk out on him. What would become of me and my children were I to leave. No, I cannot leave him, even if he is married again.

This finding should be interpreted in the context of the patriarchal nature of most communities in the study area. In these communities, women are least empowered in terms property ownership and engagement in economic activities. Consequently, the majority of the women are dependent on their husbands for their upkeep and that of their children. These women were therefore compelled to remain with their husbands after the husbands married a second wife because these women afraid that they will not be able to meet the needs of their children on their own. There also women who were motivated to remain with the husband by the investment they had made in the marriage. This is captured in the account of one of the respondents:

When I got married, my husband did not have anything. We started from scratch. We worked hard to acquire all this wealth that he currently possesses. I could not just leave all these for another woman who did not even work for them to enjoy (Interviewee9, 53 years old).

This account indicate that the respondent felt that she had invested a lot in the married and was entitled to stay and enjoy the benefit. She could not leave what she had worked for to another person. She wanted to secure her wellbeing and that of her children.

4.2.3 Family values

For some women, their decision to remain with the husband was motivated by family values such as fidelity and perseverance. One of the respondents expressed that that although she did not want her husband to get another wife, she had to support his decision to prevent him from having illegitimate intimate affairs. According to her, settling down with one more woman is far less destructive than having a husband who cheats with multiple women. She said:

My husbands' decision to get another wife is better than him cheating on me with many women. At least now I know where he is when he is not with me at night. This is better than the anxiety that comes with

trying to imagine where your husband is (Interviewee16, 38 years old).

This account suggests that due to the respondent's value for fidelity, she was willing to allow her husband to marry another wife. Some women were motivated to stay in their respective marriages by virtuous such as perseverance, sacredness of marriage, and commitment to marriage. This was captured in the conversation with Interviewee21, who narrated that she had to remain with her husband because she believed that marriage is a life-long commitment.

I believe that marriage is a life-long commitment; it is not something you take casually. You have to persevere through the challenges that you encounter along the way. You don't just walk in and walk out of marriage (Interviewee21, 36 years old).

It is evident that the respondent's values are closely connected to her religious beliefs, which further reinforces the role that religion plays in propagating polygyny. Many religions promote values of fidelity in marriage, perseverance, and commitment. Christians consider marriage to be a life-long commitment where couples can only be separated by death. Divorce and separation are usually the last option for religious women.

4.3 Discussion

Results show that the majority of interviewed women were not aware that they were joining a polygynous union at the time that they were getting married. A majority of these women were first wives and were not aware that their husbands had intention to marry other wives at the time they were getting married. For most of these women, the husband just married a second wife without even seeking their consent. Some respondents reported that they learned about their husband second wives' after many years. This finding brings fourth the contentious issue about the need for a husband to seek consent from his current wives before bringing another wife.

The requirement for the husband to seek consent from current wives was one of the most debated provisions in the Marriage Act of 2014, which was eventually passed without the requirement for consent (Republic of Kenya, 2014). This means that the current law allows a man to marry as many wives without seeking consent from his current wives. In October 2015, the Nairobi High Court ruled that polygamous marriages that are registered without the consent of the man's current wives are unconstitutional because this practice is inconsistent with the constitutional principle of equality (Muthoni, 2017). In this ruling, Justice Mumbi Ngugi noted that women have equal rights to determine what happens in their marriage; hence, they should be involved in the decision to marry another wife. However, the decision did not invalidate the Marriage Act of 2014 as the judge ruled that this was among the issues that the court cannot regulate and must be left to the wishes of the people exercised through the duly elected representatives.

When asked why they remained with the husband despite him bringing another wife without their consent, the majority of the women said that they did it to protect the wellbeing of their children. As highlighted earlier, the majority of the women in polygynous marriage are economically dependent on their husbands. This dependency makes them vulnerable and gives them little bargaining power when it comes to making decision regarding their marriage. The high representation of first wives in this study can be explained by the fact that the study was conducted in a rural setting. Most of the women who reported being unaware of their polygynous status is married to men who live and work in urban areas. The husband married other wives from the places they are working in and are currently living with them.

Results also show that culture is a major driver of polygyny within the study area. The study found a number of women who were married to their late sister's husband after the demise of the sister or married by their husband relative after the demise of the husband. This finding brings to fourth the culture of wife inheritance. Wife inheritance was a common practice in the traditional Luo community. Although this practice has declined over the past decades; there are few individuals who still practice it (Perry *et al.*, 2014). In most cases, women are compelled to observe these traditions by the kin rather than do it out of their own will. Another cultural issue that was brought is arranged marriages. The study also revealed that for some women, the decision to get married to a polygynous union was made by their families rather than by themselves. This practice can also be traced back to the patriarchal culture that characterizes most communities in Kenya. According to Musalia (2017), many communities in Kenya assign decision-making authority to men and discourage women involvement even in decision that affects their personal lives such as marriage. Being married-off without consent is also linked to the culture of early marriage where girls are married-off at very young age where there do not have a lot of say in the families (Thobejane & Flora, 2014). These young girls cannot stand-up to their families when a spouse is selected for them.

The influence of family on the women's decision to get married into a polygynous union can also be linked to the collectivist culture that characterized most traditional Kenyan and African communities. As Bejanyan *et al.* (2015)

explained, collectivist cultures emphasize the importance of family and prioritize group rather than individual goals. Communities with collectivist culture have strong interdependent ties among its members. Decisions are made collectively with a strong emphasis on the wellbeing of the community/ family as whole rather than the individual that is directly affected by the decisions. Collective cultures are also characterized with a lot of respect towards the elderly and people in authority such as parents. Consequently, parents and families have a lot of influence over the relationship choices of their children.

The study further revealed that some women were driven into polygynous unions by economic factors. The economic factors were divided into two major issues: bride price payment and poverty. Results revealed that some women were married off to polygynous men by their families because the families wanted to gain economically by receiving bride price. Other women made the decision to get married willingly with the hope of escaping poverty and suffering in their families. The role of bride price payment in propagating polygyny was compounded by the high level of poverty in the study. Since many families were living in heightened state of deprivation, they had greater incentive to marry-off their daughter in exchange for material gain. Similarly, the high level of poverty meant that only a few men who can pay high bride price were available in the area leading to high incidents of polygyny.

Social factors also played a role in driving some women to polygyny. The social factors include love, societal pressure, and pregnancy out of wedlock. Some of the sampled women cited that they got married for love. These finding challenges the proposition made by Fenske (2013) that polygynous union are largely fueled by resource differential among men in the society. According to this argument, polygyny exists because many women would rather be married to the few resourced men in the society that being an only wife to a man with little resource. This proposition suggests that women in polygynous union marry mainly for material reasons. In line with the findings of the current study, Thobejane and Flora (2014) also found that some women seek genuine love and companionship among polygynous spouses. The study has also established that there are few women within the study area who get married into polygynous union due to societal pressure.

Some women reported that they felt pressured when all their peers and even those who were younger than them got married before them. Some felt pressured by the families who demanded to have grandchildren, nephews, and nieces. As Bantebya, Kyoheirwe, and Watson (2014) explained, it is a common expectation and norm even among modern African communities that women should get married and start family before they reach the age of 30 years. Consequently, women start feeling the pressure to get married when they approach their late twenties and thirties without being married. Some women become desperate and get married into unions that are contrary to their values and liking. Zamambo and Nampumelelo (2015) also highlighted that in most Africa communities, being married and having your own family is viewed as a prestigious achievement. As result, many women feel pressured to get married and start families especially when they reach a certain age. Some women end up joining polygynous union out of desperation.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Over half of the interviewed women reported that they were not aware that they were getting married into a polygynous union. Most of these women were married to what they believed would be a monogamous union only for the husband to bring in another wife into the marriages. The majority of these women said that their husbands did not consult them when remarrying. Those who were aware that they are being married to a polygynous man were driven by various factors including cultural reasons, family decisions, love, and societal pressure.

To safeguard the wellbeing of such women, legislatures should consider reviewing the Marriage Act of 2014. Specifically, they should consider introducing the provision that requires current wives to be consulted before the husband marries another wife. As it is, the current law discriminates against women by giving them little voice over what happens to their marriage. As was evident in this study, a husband can make the decision to convert a marriage that wife thought would be monogamous into a polygamous marriage

Women who got married to a polygynous man knowingly attributed their decision to cultural, economic, social, and religious factors. The main cultural factors were patriarchy, arranged marriages, and wife inheritance. Programs aimed at sensitizing the local community regarding the problem arising from negative cultural practices such as wife inheritance should be developed and implemented. Evidence has shown that education interventions can be effective in changing a community's attitude and behavior. However, the education programs need to be intensive, lengthy, and use a wide variety of approaches in order to produce positive and lasting change.

Economic factors include the need for their family to receive bride price and the need to escape poverty by getting

married to a man with a better economic status. These economic factors can be addressed by implementing programmes aimed at empowering families in the region particularly the women. Programmes such as public microfinance schemes would help families to gain capital that they need to accumulate assets and establish income generating activities, thereby, eliminating the pressure to marry-off their daughters with the sole aim of receiving bride price. Social factors were love, societal pressure to get married, and pregnancy out-of-wedlock while some said that their marriage was dictated by religious beliefs. These factors can best be addressed through education and awareness programmes.

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