

Women and Polygamy in Comoros

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Abstract

The majority of women surveyed in this study denounce this practice and still accept it because it is a divine order, a social practice without denying the consequences. Polygamy is perceived as a mysterious phenomenon, purely private, governed by customary, religious and radical rules. This study will allow us to reflect on the consequences of polygamy for women in order to improve the situation. We are very motivated to carry out this study, because the number of divorce by polygamy is too high in the whole territory. The public opinion very often equates polygamy with Islam, whereas this religion has imposed certain conditions to access this business.

Thus, the system of "turns" specific to the life of polygamous households, and the impossibility of negotiating these "turns" or exchanging them, institutes barriers between couples formed by the husband without the opinion of his wives. This situation increases women's frustration and is reprehensible.

Keywords: Polygamy; woman; Comoros; household; co-wife

INTRODUCTION

Polygamy is a reality in Comoros and continues to divide public opinion. Officially it is allowed by society. The family code, Muslim

law and custom are in favor of it. It is more or less accepted by the wives. Some say it is a religious obligation and others say it is a social duty. It is an injustice of the man, a kind of slavery of the woman.

Polygamy can be adopted to respect tradition, to gain some contentment in one's locality. In general, experience shows that polygamy has not worked very well," says a 47-year-old man. In a polygamous couple, there are always arguments and heartaches.

In theory, polygamy is forbidden in many countries of the world, but in practice, it is more or less tolerated in the Comoros archipelago, with total indifference to what the women have to say. We do not have an exact figure on the number of polygamous families living on the whole national territory. However, we do have a very disturbing figure: 42% of women accept polygamy to a greater or lesser extent without denying the consequences that go with it.

Polygamy makes Comorian women very vulnerable. She has to give herself up, because society does not seem to appreciate its real impact and considers her ordeal to be a fatality. Young women who are victims of polygamy find themselves obliged to submit to their husbands in order to avoid social shame, repudiation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Our survey was conducted in the three islands constituting the union of Comoros namely Anjouan, Moheli and Grande Comore between April 2014 and November 2017. The survey was financed by our own means and the assistance of a friend, Dr. Chakir Ismaël.

The objective of this survey is to provide some clues to enable political and religious authorities and notables to become aware of the plight of women caused by polygamy.

Our research concerns polygamy and Comorian women. Specifically, our study aims to demonstrate and denounce the consequences of this scourge, which continues to grow. We interviewed 23 widows, 18 divorcees, 28 polygamous households, 08 religious leaders, 14 notables and 09 academics.

a. Data Collection Tool

During the survey, interviews were conducted using a pre-established questionnaire with the people mentioned above. The survey allowed us to identify some of the factors that determine women's suffering

related to the phenomenon of polygamy. An individual survey of social actors was conducted. We also consulted national reports on gender. All the women in our study were between 17 and 43 years old. Nearly 61% of those interviewed live in rural areas.

RESULTS

We interviewed 45 polygamous households, 12 religious leaders, and 22 women who were divorced because of polygamy. 19 of the 22 women in our study are caring for their children alone after the divorce. The issue of polygamy has many social, health, and legal consequences of which women are always the main victims.

Secondly, our study allowed us to obtain information on polygamy. We recorded 73% of divorces caused by jealousy or disputes between co-wives and 79% of the households surveyed were single-parent female households.

Nearly 68% of polygamous couples live in rural areas. This suggests that women living in urban areas are less affected by this scourge. In this study, more widows (73%) than widowers (27%) were recorded. A polygamist who dies leaves several widows and a wife who dies, the polygamist is in union. Similarly, a polygamist who divorces one of his wives remains in a union, unlike the wife.

According to a notable in the village of Hantsambou, some women often leave their husbands to protect themselves from an aggressive co-wife. Some think that they are bewitched by a co-wife's marabout. Fear, jealousy, rivalry and sometimes hatred are felt in polygamous households. Some women pretend to accept this situation while they are in pain, morally and physically.

There is a recurrent opposition between tradition and modernity, between the particular and the universal, between human rights and cultural diversity.

Unlike other countries that have legalized polygamy, the Comoros, a matrilineal society, ensures that men are housed separately in the homes of their wives by practicing a night-sharing system of residence by wife. This study is based on demonstrating and denouncing the suffering that Comorian women and their children undergo as a result of polygamy.

DISCUSSION

Managing multiple wives and children and agreeing to share one's spouse with others is not as simple as it sounds. Some men use their religious right to take several wives without worrying about the harmful consequences for their wives and children. This freedom is granted to the man by the family code to make and remake the marriage without being subjected to any rule of procedure.

Polygamy remains one of the causes of divorce. Divorce is a decision taken by the husband alone to separate from his wife according to Article 57 of the Comorian Family Code. The divorce rate is very high throughout the country. The worst thing is that often, by repudiating the wife, the man gets rid of the children at the same time, who then fall back on the mother, the maternal uncle or the grandmother with their meager resources.

Polygamy is granted to the man by the family code, Muslim law and custom, to make and remake the marriage without being subject to any procedural rules.

Polygamy can be a vector of sexually transmitted diseases, because if one spouse is sick, the others may be sick too¹.

Polygamy, like poverty, continues to be a serious problem. For this reason, the role of awareness and education remains a better asset in the fight against social inequality in general and polygamy in particular.

The difficulties of polygamy are not only sentimental or familial; it is a source of segregation. The children and wives of polygamists are not treated in the same way or given the same consideration. In short, women from the same locality as the husband, or the youngest, or the one chosen by the family, are given special treatment to the detriment of others.

¹ Abderemane Soilihi DJAE, promoting gender equality in human development in Comoros [PhD thesis in sociology, University of Antananarivo], 2019, 394 p.

Polygamy refers to a matrimonial regime in which an individual is bound, at the same time, to several spouses. For a woman with several men, it is also called polyandry; for a man with several women, polygyny.²

As a general rule, in Mayotte, a Comorian territory under French administration, plural marriage is present. However, it is rare for a husband to take more than two wives. Since the population is subject to French civil law, polygamy is a reality in Mayotte. It is becoming less and less accepted by the population itself.

The fact that polygamy should not be practiced by the local population, as this practice is essentially prohibited by Article 147 of the French Civil Code knowing that a second marriage, on French territory, requires a prior divorce from which a marriage with a married man or woman is prohibited.

We found that in this study, wives from polygamous households have a difficult marital life. 63% of them claim to have difficulties related to family stress and the "exhausted woman syndrome" in contrast to monogamous women. They have low self-esteem, a sense of failure in their lives, persistent anxiety and even depression.

The Comoros, like Algeria, Benin, Cameroon, Congo, Ivory Coast, Gabon, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Senegal, Togo and Tunisia, have authorized the practice of polygamy without worrying about the consequences. The plural marriage practiced in Comoros can lead to jealousy, maraboutage between wives as well as unequal distribution of domestic resources, factors that could create disgust between wives and children pay a high price.

In this study, 87% of men stated that in a polygamous household, the man owes his wives fidelity in the same way that his wives owe him fidelity. This marriage is both customary and religious and is considered a divine privilege of the man.

It is clear that polygamy is a source of family conflicts and even marital violence. Children are at risk of delinquency due to the repeated absence of parental authority. The increase in the number of wives and of course children increases the family burdens of the

² Abderemane Soilihi DJAE. « *Polygamy phenomenon in Comoros* », in Alterinfo.net

polygamous husband, which often constitutes an obstacle for the education and health of the children.

a) Gerontophilia

During this study, we did not come across a case of a polygamous couple where the man is a gerontophile, while the opposite is totally present. This behavior, in which one of the couples is sexually attracted to a very old partner, could lead to an early union for the woman with the social and health consequences that go with it.

b) Nymphomania

Some women in our survey shyly confess that their husbands are nymphomaniacs due to the fact that the man is sexually obsessed with his very young wife, often the age of his daughter. This rare desire disorder is characterized by an indispensable need to have sexual intercourse. In this case, the turn system in the polygamous couple allows the very young wife to rest. The feeling of pleasure in front of which the man is completely dependent is too dangerous.

Despite this high frequency or sexual appetite in the younger wife, the older wife tells us that their husband is asexual. They can go months or even a year without the husband consummating the marriage. A 39-year-old woman said that her husband spends his intimate time with his second wife. She estimates that the last time she had her husband in bed was 19 months ago.

c) Polyamorous³

It is a system or practice based on several partners at the same time. This dynamic of exchange is driven by a high sexual appetite where affection, non-exclusive attachment remains visible than the simple desire to fulfill physiological impulses.

In practice, polyamorous people have several love relationships at the same time. However, polyamorous people refuse all ideas of deception. Fidelity for them is to dare to tell their partner that there are many in the "Ship". So, in fact, each partner knows the existence of the others and accepts it. As in any couple (monogamy, polygamy or polyandry), there are rules.

³ Polyamory is the possibility of having several love relationships simultaneously with the consent of your partner, without rivalry or anger

"Polyamory teaches you to be autonomous, to love with detachment. One loves with feelings, but without dependence. This implies having confidence in oneself, so as not to feel broken if the other person does not respond to what one wants"⁴

Loving several people at the same time and having several love and sexual relationships at the same time with the consent of the partners is rationally incomprehensible.

The multiplication of partners affects both women and men. The pursuit of this excessive sexual maneuver, women are not indifferent.

d) Open Couple

An open relationship is an interpersonal relationship in which each party desires to be with the other, agreeing to form a non-monogamous relationship.

One wonders then, is the ability to feel love for several people at the same time possible? Isn't this group union dangerous for society? A Couple with three for example maintained a common life which is different with what the young people of today, call "Partouse".

CONCLUSION

Marriage is an important step in the life of each individual. It is also an indispensable social institution, especially in a Muslim society that forbids all sexual relations outside marriage. Marriage remains a sacred duty that must be fulfilled.

In principle, the situation of polygamy is always very badly experienced by the woman who sees this choice imposed by the Comorian society. Polygamy can be a vector of sexually transmitted diseases, because if one of the spouses is ill, the others may also be ill. In Mayotte, as in Reunion, despite its status as a French department, plural marriage is commonplace. The main victims among co-wives are Comorian women from the other three islands and Malagasy women, according to a previous study we conducted. A competition, not to say a war, between co-wives is ongoing. They indulge in

⁴ <https://www.encyclopedie.fr/definition/polygamie>

constant insults and maraboutage. As always, the great accomplice remains the father of the family, who never stops his game of hide and seek love.

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