

# Polygamy in the World and the West

**Description:** An exposition on the hypocritical and ethnocentric Western attitude on polygamy.

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Polygamy in the global community is common, normal and accepted. According to the *Ethnographic Atlas Codebook*<sup>[1]</sup> derived from George P. Murdock's *Ethnographic Atlas* recorded the marital composition of 1231 societies, from 1960-1980. Of these societies, 186 societies were monogamous. 1041 were polygynous. According to Joseph Ginat, the author of 'Polygamous Families in Contemporary Society,' a third of the world's population belongs to a community that allows it.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Polygamy in the West Today

The Western attitude towards polygamy is ethnocentric and hypocritical. The point that is often misunderstood in the West is that women in other cultures - especially African and Islamic - do not necessarily look at polygamy as a sign of women's degradation. Consequently, to equate polygamy with degrading women is an ethnocentric judgment of other societies. The ethnocentric revulsion for polygamy is best reflected in US Supreme Court's 1878 opinion in *Reynolds vs. United States*. The court refused to recognize polygamy as a legitimate religious practice, dismissing it as "almost exclusively a feature of the life of Asiatic and African people." In later decisions, the court declared polygamy to be "a blot on our civilization" and compared it to human sacrifice and "a return to barbarism." Most tellingly, the court found that the practice is "contrary to the spirit of Christianity and of the civilization which Christianity has produced in the Western World."<sup>[3]</sup>

In the West today, it is common for married men to have extramarital relations with mistresses, girlfriends, and prostitutes. Consequently, the Western claim to monogamy<sup>[4]</sup> is a misnomer. How common are they? Estimates range between 23-50% men and 13-50% women in the US had an extramarital affair during their lifetimes. More than 15% of all husbands say they have had a series of affairs, and nearly 70% of married men younger than 40 expect to have an extramarital relationship.<sup>[5]</sup>

The fact that Western concept of monogamy is based on double-standards can be illustrated with an example. Cohabiting women is legal, socially acceptable, and even mass-marketable for airing as a reality TV show, but a polygamous marriage involving moral and financial responsibility towards a woman and her children is considered socially immoral and illegal! There are even some who support "open marriages", in which each spouse is free to have "extramarital" partners. Playboy magazine's November 2005 edition displays its 80 year old founder-owner, Hugh Hefner's three live-in women. This is in co-ordination with a reality TV show on E! called, "Girls Next Door." Cameras

follow his three "official" girlfriends as they live with him essentially as "wives;" they just lack a government marriage license.

Monogamy does not protect women, but the men who exploit her. Polygamy protects the interests of women and children in society. Man is opposed to polygamy, not because monogamy is moral, but because he wants to satisfy his desire for variety by indulging in unlimited adultery. Sin, not fidelity, has taken the place of polygamy. That is why man is opposed to plurality of wives which commits him to many duties and responsibilities, financial and otherwise. Monogamy allows him to enjoy extra-marital affairs without obligatory economic consequences. He can "play around" without taking responsibility for his sexual conduct. Legalized polygamy would require him to spend on his additional wives and their offspring.

Birth control and the ease of abortion have opened sex for fun to Western women. But she is still the one who suffers the trauma of abortion and the side effects of birth control methods. If a man wishes to have a second wife he takes care of, whose children carry his name, he is considered a criminal who may be sentenced to years in jail. However, if he has numerous mistresses and illegitimate children his relation is left unpunishable in many countries.

In the past, even for a licentious man, opportunities for sin were limited. That is why he had to take recourse to polygamy and, in spite of some evading their many duties, he still had to shoulder certain responsibilities in respect to his wives and children. Today, a man who has ample opportunities of enjoyment does not see any necessity of making the least commitment; hence, his aversion to polygamy.

The hypocrisy of the West towards polygamy can also be seen in the fact that taking a second wife, even with the free consent of the first wife, is a violation of Western law. On the other hand, cheating on the wife, without her knowledge or consent, is legitimate in the eyes of the law. What is the legal wisdom behind such a contradiction? Is the law designed to reward deception and punish honesty? It is an unfathomable paradox of the modern 'civilized' world. Furthermore, homosexuality is legal, but polygamy is illegal and, in some cases, criminal.

Moreover, on top of leaving a substantial number of women 'on the shelf' by denying their attachment to a man as a second wife, western nations further deprive surplus woman of the male sex by legalizing homosexuality. It is inhuman to have a woman as a second wife, according to these biased standards, but if the second "wife" happens to be a male "mistress," then it is not a crime. Homosexuality, we are told, is an acceptable lifestyle in conformity with the requirements of the modern man! The Western attitude is the logical outcome of rejecting God's revelation that brings harmony between human beings and their innate nature.

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Endnotes:

[1] (<http://eclectic.ss.uci.edu/~drwhite/worldcul/Codebook4EthnoAtlas.pdf>)

[2] Peggy Fletcher Stack, "Globally, Polygamy Is Commonplace," The Salt Lake Tribune 20 Sep. 1998.

[3] Jonathan Turley, "Polygamy Laws Expose Our Own Hypocrisy," USA Today 3 Oct. 2004. Turley is the Shapiro Professor of Public Interest Law at George Washington Law School.

[4] Webster's Heritage Dictionary, "The practice or condition of having a single sexual partner during a period of time."

[5] Laurel Richardson, "Another World; More and More Single Women Are Opting for Affairs with Married Men, and the Trend Is Diminishing Feminist Progress," Psychology Today, vol. 20, February 1986.

"Extramarital Affairs Are Not So Common"; USA Today (Society for the Advancement of Education), vol. 126, May 1998.

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