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Islam and Polygamy: A Case Study in Malaysia

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Abstract

The mostly Muslim nation of Malaysia has always walked a fine line between protecting the rights of Malay women and acknowledging the role that Islam plays in the daily lives of its citizens. Yet many of the obstacles facing Malaysian society disproportionately affect women – mentioning one is polygamy. Can polygamy be questioned in Islam? Are there possibilities to restrict or ban polygamy in Muslim societies? This paper therefore engages in analyzing the perception of university students on the above issue.

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Keywords: Polygamy, university students, Malaysia;

1. Introduction

Malaysia is among several Muslim countries sharing the history of Islamic resurgence. Organizations bearing the standard of Islamic revival have been gaining approval nationwide, and the impact they have had is particularly evident at a socio-political level (Othman, 2006). The Islamic revival in Malaysia has been defined by what is known as the *dakwah* movements which is often perceived in opposition to the economic, political, and social supremacy of their Western counterparts (Nagata, 1984; Narli, 1991). The phenomenon has also been defined as a symbol of the difference between the traditional and the Western (Karim, 1992). Women, as the bearers of cultural values and traditions, are important symbols in the politics of Islamic revivalism and Islamic state policy (Moghadam, 1994). The *dakwah* movement also opposed Western values, the sexual objectification of women and the Occidental brand of feminism. As such, the veil became an important symbol in the efforts of the Malay female community in establishing their Muslim identity, and the act of unveiling became associated with the West. This is why a majority of working professional women still wear the veil, as visible declarations of their commitment to Islam.

In addition to veiling and women's limited role as mothers and wives, *dakwah* also propagates the practice of polygamy. The debate about polygamy in Malaysia can be traced to the 1980s Islamic revivalist movements throughout the Muslim world that give rise to political Islam and pose severe challenges to women's rights activists involved in the push for democracy and respect for human rights, particularly Muslim women's rights. As such Muslim women are at the forefront in countering Islamic political activists and their use of religion in justifying women's oppression and justifying polygamy. In fact, many Muslim women challenge the subordination of women justified in the name of its religion, Islam. Instead, they fault the patriarchal interpretation of religious texts that allows polygamy for Muslim men.

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Muslim feminist's call for restrictions on polygamy as they believe that polygamy is a pre-Islamic practice and that conditions attached to polygamy like justice cannot be fulfilled in the modern age and therefore it should be banned/ restricted. In contrast to this view, a general belief among the Muslims in Malaysia is that the polygamy is an Islamic practice and mentioned in the Qur'an, therefore it cannot be questioned. This view is based on the fact that the Qur'an is unquestionable, what so ever mentioned in the Qur'an must be followed. Now this makes it a bit difficult to analyze whether the calls by Muslim feminists for restricting polygamy are questioning the Qur'an.

2. Method

It is imperative for a researcher employ research approaches that can provide me with the tools necessary for the analysis of issues. Because of the reason enumerated above, I have strategically employed quantitative survey. The use of a quantitative method was beneficial to this research because it contains consistent methods for data collection – most of the time in the form of a survey. Information that comes through this method can be organized into figures/ numbers to facilitate a form of statistical analysis (Meadows, 2003).

The participants for this study come from University of Malaya Malaysia who are final year female Muslim undergraduate studies. Locating my research in University was helpful as provided me with an environment where people are more open to debates and new ideas. Parts from this, students are the future leaders and they occupy several positions in government and private machinery and some may hold positions at the policy level. They are the ones who are going to decide the future of the nation. It is important to know their perceptions. Three faculties are chosen namely, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Academy of Islamic Studies and Faculty of Sciences. It is imperative that students in all three faculties are grounded in different academic fields; therefore a varying perception is expected from each faculty giving researcher a wide range of opinions on the issue.

To ensure the consistency of the result, a sample size is determined based on the calculations by Krejcie and Morgan (1970). This is mainly done to ensure that the probability of committing type I error is $p < .05$. The target set in the sample size was 100 % achieved as the researcher approached all the respondents in person, guided them step by step to fill in the survey questionnaire. Based on the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination, the respondents were 218 as shown in Table 1. From the marital factor, a total of 186 (85.32 %) out of 218 are single majority of the students still in the younger age (final year bachelor students). Thus the married students are only 32 (14.68%). The data collected is analyzed through SPSS and survey utilized a 5-item Likert Scale with responses as follows: Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Undecided, 4 = Disagree and 5= strongly Disagree.

Table 1. Demographic of the respondents based on marital status

Variable	Category	n	%
Marital status	Single	186	85.32
	Married	32	14.68
Student faculty	Arts	32	14.68
	Islamic studies	123	56.42
	Science	63	28.90

3. Results

3.1. Agreement on polygamy issues

The results in Table 2 show that nearly half of the respondents (47 %) agree that polygamy is a social or moral issue and 34 % respondents agree that polygamy is a form of sexism. In addition to that, 46 % respondents agree that polygamy is an Islamic issue and at the same time 51% respondents disagree to involve in a polygamous marriage. Moreover, nearly half of the respondents (47 %) agree that since polygamy is an Islamic practice, therefore it cannot be questioned. And 42 % of the respondents disagree that polygamy brings more benefits to men than women.

Table 2. Results of the survey questionnaire

Statement	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
Polygamy is a social or moral issue	47 %	37 %	16 %
Polygamy is a form of sexism	34 %	32 %	21 %
Polygamy is an Islamic Issue	46 %	13 %	41 %
Would you like to have a polygamous marriage	23 %	51 %	22 %
As polygamy is an Islamic practice, it cannot be questioned	47 %	19 %	34 %
Polygamy brings more benefits to men than women	37 %	42 %	21 %
Divorce affects women more than men	33 %	21 %	46 %
The laws pertaining to the practice of polygamy should be made stricter.	39 %	19 %	42 %
The laws pertaining to the practice of polygamy should be implemented and followed properly.	52 %	09 %	39 %
The Qur'an gives liberty not only for Muslim men but also Muslim women	49 %	05 %	46 %
<i>Ulema</i> who only comprised of men are the only authorized people who should interpret the Qur'an	62 %	19 %	19 %
Learned Muslim men and women although not <i>Ulema</i> can also be involved in the interpretation work	42 %	22 %	45 %
The interpretation of the Qur'an is male dominated, therefore polygamous marriages occur.	22 %	31 %	47 %
Women's voices are repressed or muted in the interpretation of the Qur'an and therefore issues like polygamy are considered Islamic.	21 %	33 %	47 %
Muslim women Feminist should be allowed to interpret the Qur'an?	18 %	33 %	49 %
Polygamy should be banned	32 %	29 %	39 %

Parts from that, 33% of the respondents agree that divorce affects women more than men and 39% of the respondents agree that the laws pertaining to the practice of polygamy should be made stricter. Whereas, 52 % agree that the laws pertaining to the practice of polygamy should be implemented and followed properly. Moreover, 49 % respondents agree that Qur'an gives liberty not only for Muslim men but also Muslim women and 62 agree that the *Ulema* who only comprised of men are the only authorized people who should interpret the Qur'an. In addition to that, 42 % agree that learned Muslim men and women although not *Ulema* can also be involved in the interpretation work. 31 % respondents disagree that the interpretation of the Qur'an is male dominated, therefore polygamous marriages occur. 33 % of the respondents disagree that women's voices are repressed or muted in the interpretation of the Qur'an and therefore issues like polygamy are considered Islamic. 33 % respondents disagree that Muslim woman Feminist should be allowed to interpret the Qur'an? And finally, 32 % agree that Polygamy should be banned.

Table 3 shows the difference of perception among the students on polygamy based on the field of study. It illustrates that in the Faculty of Arts students remain neutral with 66.1 %, 15.3 % agree and 18.6 % disagree. Furthermore, in the Faculty of Islamic Studies 56.0 % remain neutral, 22.9 % agree and 22.1% disagree. Moreover, in the faculty of science, 62.6% remain neutral, 32.2% agree and only 5.3 % disagree.

3.2. Comparison between field of studies

The results illustrate that science students have the highest level of agreement (32.2%) and Arts students have the lowest (18.6%). The Islamic studies students are in the middle. This means that Science students are more positive in their perception of reforms on polygamy and divorce and Arts students are more negative in this case. The level of agreement (22.9%) among Islamic studies students is higher as compared to the level of disagreement (21.1%) which means that Islamic studies students fall more positive towards reform of laws on polygamy and divorce.

Table 3. Contingency table for polygamy based on field of study

Field of Study	Statistics	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Total
Arts	n	22	78	18	118

	% within Faculty	18.6%	66.1%	15.3%	100.0%
	% within category	32.4%	27.6%	15.9%	25.4%
Islamic Studies	n	37	98	40	175
	% within Faculty	21.1%	56.0%	22.9%	100.0%
	% within category	54.4%	34.6%	35.4%	37.7%
Science	n	9	107	55	171
	% within Faculty	5.3%	62.6%	32.2%	100.0%
	% within category	13.2%	37.8%	48.7%	36.9%
Total	n	68	283	113	464
	% within Faculty	14.7%	61.0%	24.4%	100.0%
	% within category	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

4. Discussion

The findings suggest that respondents of the study agree that polygamy is an Islamic practice and therefore it cannot be questioned. The reasons that why subjects support polygamy is because it is clearly mentioned in the Qur'an and Islam allow it – though with certain conditions. These conditions include: (1) the wife(s) has no objection about polygamy during or before the marriage contract and if the husband disregards that, the wife has the right to raise that to the Islamic court, (2) If a man can do equitable treatment for all the wives, (3) if the man is wealthy enough to fulfil all their financial needs, and (4) if women are unable to produce children. If the man lacks those material and moral conditions, or he is not competent enough to satisfy all of them, then he will not be eligible to take more than one wife. Also, Islam has emphasized that the basic objective of healthy marital life comes from mutual love and benevolence between the husband and the wife which normally can be found in the form of regular marriage - monogamy. But in case if a man who does not fulfil the given conditions and still goes polygamous, it should be considered as an administrative flaw.

This finding contrasts with a study reported suggests that polygamous man have caused hardships and misery to women and children in their plural families, especially first wives and their children. Based on this study, 75 % of polygamous husbands are unable to fulfil their responsibilities as provider and protector. Over 80 % husbands have failed to continue in providing the required and necessary *nafkah zahir* (material/economic maintenance) for them and their children (Othman, 2012).

Furthermore, the findings also suggest that science students are more positive in their perception of reforms on the laws regarding polygamy and arts students are more negative in this case. The science students rather think of polygamy in economic perspectives and believe that polygamous marriages create economic problems as a husband has to look after more than one family at a time. In contrast, the social sciences students take polygamy as conditional – as they say it depends on the partners how they manage a polygamous marriage, and then they are also closer to their stance with the students of Islamic studies that it is mentioned in the Qur'an therefore banning polygamy is never an option. It should be seen case wise – as in some cases it is beneficial and in others in is not.

The fact that Islam encourages polygamy, though conditionally, cannot be denied. But the condition is very clear: polygamy should be practiced by men who can manage it successfully, and demonstrate an uncompromising certainty that they will treat their wives equally (*Surah* 4:129). This condition cannot be fulfilled, at least, absolutely. Islam is fully aware of that. Hence, a second thought on this part of the Qur'an suggests that Islam does not recommend polygamy as an excuse for marital disavowal (Kamaruddin and Abdullah, 2008). We need to understand that polygamy was part of the African tradition before the advent of Islam. Any attempt to refute this knowledge will amount to a gross distortion of a historical reality pertaining marriage life in pre-Islamic—and pre-colonial-Africa (Alexandre, 2007). Although Islam did impart the African life when it came, it will be wrong to hold Islam absolutely responsible for all the problems polygamy creates.

Nevertheless, polygamy is still practiced almost in all Muslim societies with a greater incidence in the Middle East - where polygamy is taken as an Islamic act that protects Muslim women from posterity and low moral values – for them the advantages of polygamy far outweigh the disadvantages. Indeed, the proponents of polygamy claim that its practice favours women more than a men – as it protects them from social degradation and low moral values. A most common argument is that it favours Muslim women better to share a husband rather than accepting a living of spinsterhood.

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