



## Polygamy and Its Implications on Christianity in Southwest Nigeria: A Sociological Perspective

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### *Abstract*

Polygamy remains a significant cultural and religious practice in Southwest Nigeria, often conflicting with Christian doctrines that emphasize monogamy. This study explores the implications of polygamy on Christianity, examining its theological, social, and legal dimensions. Using a mixed-methods approach, data was collected from Christian leaders and polygamous individuals across various denominations. Results indicate that while 81.2% of respondents consider polygamy sinful, 94.4% agree that polygamous individuals should be full church members. However, 87.1% strongly oppose allowing polygamous individuals in leadership roles. The study also reveals that polygamous families face emotional distress, gender inequality, and legal uncertainties. Children from polygamous homes reported the highest level of dissatisfaction (83.8%), citing neglect and inheritance conflicts. Findings indicate that while most churches consider polygamy sinful, they still allow polygamous individuals to be members, though they are restricted from leadership roles. The study also highlights the emotional and financial challenges faced by women and children in polygamous households, including gender inequality, psychological distress, and inheritance disputes. Additionally, Nigeria's plural legal system complicates the recognition and regulation of polygamous unions. Despite the tensions between cultural traditions and Christian teachings, many respondents advocate for inclusivity while upholding monogamy as the ideal.

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The study recommends that churches offer support to polygamous families, clarify leadership policies, and promote legal reforms to protect women and children's rights.

## INTRODUCTION

Polygamy—the practice of having multiple spouses simultaneously—is a complex social, cultural, and religious phenomenon. Specifically, *polygyny* refers to one man having several wives, while *polyandry* refers to one woman having multiple husbands (Smith, 2018:45). Although polygamy has historically been practiced in many societies, it remains a contentious topic in contemporary legal and ethical debates. Advocates view it as a legitimate cultural tradition and an expression of individual choice, whereas critics argue that it can lead to social instability and perpetuate gender inequality (Jones, 2021:102). Legally, many countries have banned polygamy over human rights concerns and potential legal complications (Brown, 2019:76). Nevertheless, it persists in certain indigenous and religious communities, even where it is officially prohibited (Williams, 2020:88). Across Africa, the legal treatment of polygamy varies. Some nations, such as South Africa and Kenya, recognize polygamous unions when they comply with customary or religious laws (Eze, 2020:56). Others, including Tunisia and Ethiopia, have outlawed the practice to align with international human rights standards (Fenske, 2015:432). The ongoing debate around polygamy often centers on themes of gender relations, cultural relativism, and individual rights. Polygamy profoundly shapes gender dynamics, frequently reinforcing patriarchal norms. Men often gain social prestige through multiple marriages, while women may face economic dependency and limited marital rights (Kalu, 2019:178). Critics contend that polygamy exacerbates gender inequality by constraining women's autonomy and access to resources (Guyer, 2018:317). However, proponents argue that polygamous structures can provide economic security and social cohesion, especially in rural contexts where communal living is integral (Musharu and Ayot, 2021:124). Historically, polygamy has been deeply embedded in African societies, tied to cultural, religious, and economic traditions. In many cases, polygyny—where one man marries multiple women—was seen as a marker of wealth and influence, as large families enhanced agricultural productivity and expanded kinship networks (Madhavan, 2016:74; Mbiti, 1990:89). Religious justifications, particularly within Islamic communities and some Christian sects, have also supported polygamous practices under specific conditions (Musharu and Ayot, 2021:121).

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In Nigeria, polygamy has long symbolized wealth, status, and agricultural strength. Large families historically secured a consistent labor force and reinforced kinship bonds. Wealthy individuals, especially chiefs and other influential figures, were more likely to have multiple wives, thereby enhancing their social prestige. Islam continues to sustain polygamous practices in many regions. Nigeria's plural legal system—which recognizes customary, religious, and statutory marriages—creates a complex legal environment: while statutory law prohibits polygamy, customary and Islamic laws permit it, resulting in varied interpretations and applications.

Critics argue that polygamy in Nigeria perpetuates gender inequality, limiting women's rights and access to economic resources. Supporters, however, highlight its role in ensuring economic stability and fostering social cohesion. In recent years, a noticeable decline in formal polygamous unions in southwest Nigeria has been accompanied by the rise of informal, multiple-partner arrangements, including relationships with "girlfriends," "babymamas," "side chicks," "hookups," and "friends with benefits." This trend reflects shifting social and economic realities, as traditional marital structures give way to more informal yet still polygamous practices. Despite evolving dynamics, polygamy remains deeply rooted in many Nigerian communities, especially those upholding traditional values, religious teachings, and kinship structures. As Nigeria continues to modernize, the debate surrounding polygamy encapsulates broader discussions about gender equality, cultural preservation, and legal reform.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Polygamy remains a deeply rooted cultural practice in Southwest Nigeria, often justified by historical, economic, and religious factors. However, its implications on Christianity present significant challenges that require careful examination. Although widely practised, polygamy is sometimes in conflict with Biblical and Jesus teachings, which stress monogamy as the perfect marital framework. Some believers are left perplexed by this, particularly those from polygamous backgrounds who join Christianity. There are also problems with church membership and leadership, as some churches allow polygamous converts while others limit their involvement. Polygamy causes family strife and psychological suffering by linking gender inequality, emotional pain, and women's financial dependency. The existence of polygamous families is made more difficult by Nigeria's plural legal system, which recognises polygamy under customary and Islamic laws but bans it under statutory laws. Research indicates that children from polygamous families frequently suffer neglect, competition, and less resource access, therefore generating emotional

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and psychological pain that influences their general well-being and prospects. Given these challenges, this study seeks to explore the implications of polygamy on Christianity in Southwest Nigeria and provide recommendations for addressing the tensions between cultural traditions and Christian beliefs.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The study aims to examine the impact of polygamy on Christianity in Southwest Nigeria, with specific objectives to:

1. **Assess the Biblical and Theological Perspectives:** Investigate how polygamy is interpreted in the Bible and its implications for Christian teachings on marriage.
2. **Evaluate Church Policies on Polygamy:** Examine how different Christian denominations in Southwest Nigeria perceive and handle polygamous individuals within their congregations, including membership and leadership eligibility.
3. **Analyze the Social and Psychological Effects:** Explore the emotional, psychological, and economic impact of polygamy on women, children, and family stability.
4. **Examine Gender and Legal Implications:** Assess the extent to which polygamy influences gender roles, women's rights, inheritance disputes, and legal ambiguities in Nigeria's plural legal system.
5. **Provide Recommendations:** Suggest ways churches and policymakers can address the challenges associated with polygamy while upholding Christian teachings and protecting the rights of individuals affected.

### **Research Questions**

To achieve these objectives, the study seeks to answer the following key questions:

1. What are the biblical and theological perspectives on polygamy in relation to Christian marriage?
2. How do different Christian denominations in Southwest Nigeria view and respond to polygamy among their members?
3. What are the social, economic, and psychological effects of polygamy on individuals and families?
4. How does polygamy impact gender roles, inheritance disputes, and legal recognition in Nigeria?

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1. What strategies can churches and policymakers adopt to address the challenges posed by polygamy while respecting cultural and religious values?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Anthropological theory viewed polygamy, the practice of having multiple spouses simultaneously, as a social and cultural phenomenon with diverse forms, functions, and motivations. The most common forms are polygyny (one-man, multiple wives) (Birx, 2006:1882) and polyandry (one-woman, multiple husbands) (Brandon, 2016:343). This theory examined how polygamy impacts kinship structures, inheritance patterns, and social organisation, creating complex family networks and influencing power dynamics. They also linked it to economics and resource allocation, with men with access to resources able to afford multiple wives. Early anthropological theories viewed polygamy as a stage in cultural evolution, but this view is now considered simplistic. Contemporary anthropological studies acknowledge that polygamy persists in diverse forms and contexts, often linked to religious beliefs, cultural traditions, or personal preferences.

1. **Adaptive Strategy Theory:** Polygamy, especially polygyny (one man with multiple wives), is seen as an adaptation to environmental and social conditions — such as high male mortality (due to war or hunting) or economic wealth (where rich men can support many wives and children) ((Ember and Ember, 2011:245).
2. **Demographic Imbalance Theory:** In societies with more women than men (due to war, migration, or disease), polygamy ensures that more women can marry and be socially protected.
3. **Kinship and Alliance Theory (Claude Lévi-Strauss):** Marriages create alliances between groups. Polygamy can strengthen political or economic ties across multiple families or clans.

The socio-cultural theory of polygamy explains the prevalence and functions of polygamy within specific cultures, viewing it not merely as a marital arrangement but as a fundamental component of social organisation. It emphasises how polygamy reflects and reinforces broader social structures, power relations, and economic systems. In many societies, particularly across Africa, polygamy serves as a symbol of wealth, social status, and political influence. A man with multiple wives and numerous descendants is often perceived as more powerful, with expanded networks of dependants and political supporters (Lawrence-Hart, 2019:2).

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Polygamy also intersects with systems of gerontocracy, where older men sustain social dominance through polygyny, and with reproductive strategies, addressing fertility concerns and ensuring the continuation of family lines (Ukoha, 2019:180). Economically, polygamy can increase the labour force within households, facilitate resource management, and align with traditional norms regarding property and inheritance (Eissler, et al, 2024:1). Cultural and religious beliefs, as well as gender roles and socio-demographic factors (such as education level, employment status, and rural versus urban residence), further shape the practice and acceptance of polygamy (Mabaso, 2018:133). Moreover, polygamy has significant implications for women's reproductive health, influencing access to family planning services and exposure to specific health risks. Overall, the socio-cultural theory frames polygamy as a complex, multifaceted institution integral to understanding the organisation of social, economic, and political life in many traditional societies.

Religious and Cultural Theories, there are many different religious viewpoints on polygamy. In Islam, for example, polygyny is permitted under specific conditions, notably the fair treatment of all spouses (Esposito, 2010:134). Similarly, in Mormonism, polygamy was historically practiced as a religious doctrine until its formal renunciation in 1890 (Bushman, 2005:189). From a cultural relativism perspective, polygamy should be understood within the norms and values of communities that practice it, rather than judged against Western monogamous standards. The early Church Fathers generally disapproved of polygamy, interpreting the teachings of Jesus and Paul as affirming monogamous marriage. Leaders such as Augustine and Tertullian argued that polygamy was incompatible with Christian ethics (Dever, 2005:45). Nevertheless, the Old Testament depicts figures like Abraham and Solomon having multiple wives, suggesting that polygamy was once acceptable in certain historical and cultural contexts (Genesis 16:3; 1 Kings 11:3). Over time, the Christian Church officially established monogamy as the only permissible marital structure within Christian societies. Today, scholars are divided: while many argue that polygamy can contribute to gender inequality and social instability, others maintain that it remains a legitimate religious and cultural practice (Kuper, 2009:61).

Conflict theorists view polygamy as a system that perpetuates gender and societal inequality. From this perspective, polygamy often serves to maintain male social and economic dominance (Engels, 2010:123). Polygamous societies tend to exhibit a concentration of wealth and power among elite males, leaving lower-status men disadvantaged (Kramer and Boone, 2020:45).

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This stratification fosters competition among men for access to multiple wives, potentially leading to social instability. Moreover, conflict theory underscores the oppression of women within polygamous systems. Traditions surrounding polygamy often restrict women's rights and reinforce their subordination to male authority. Scholars argue that the dynamic limits women's access to education, employment, and household decision-making (Johnson, 2018:112). Research indicates that women in polygamous unions may experience higher rates of emotional distress and financial insecurity due to the division of resources among multiple wives and children (Smith et al., 2019:78). Critics from a conflict theory perspective contend that the legal and cultural norms sustaining polygamy primarily serve the interests of powerful men, marginalizing women and lower-status males. This aligns with Marx's broader assertion that social structures tend to favor the ruling class at the expense of the oppressed (Marx, 2002:19). Consequently, efforts to challenge polygamy often emerge from feminist and human rights movements advocating for gender equality and economic justice.

### **Polygamy in Nigeria: A Socio-Ethical Analysis**

Polygamy, the practice of having multiple spouses, remains a significant cultural and legal issue in Nigeria. While widely practiced among various ethnic and religious groups, polygamy is also subject to ethical scrutiny within utilitarian, deontological, and feminist frameworks. These perspectives assess its moral permissibility based on principles such as social consequences, moral duty, and gender equality. Utilitarian ethics evaluate polygamy based on its overall societal benefits or harm. John Stuart Mill's advocacy for individual liberty (Mill, 2002:13) suggests that polygamous relationships could be permissible if they maximize happiness and do not cause harm. In Nigeria, polygamy is prevalent among Muslim communities in the North, where it is legally recognized under Sharia law. Supporters argue that it provides economic and social stability, especially in agrarian communities where multiple spouses contribute to labor (Mahmud, 2013:94). However, critics highlight systemic issues such as economic disparity and emotional distress, particularly among women, which may outweigh potential benefits (Salihu, 2017:122).

From a deontological perspective, which emphasizes duty and moral principles over consequences, polygamy in Nigeria raises ethical concerns. Scholars argue that polygyny (Johnson, 2018:89) often objectifies women by reinforcing patriarchal structures (Tobin, 2015:272). Traditional practices frequently limit women's autonomy in marriage decisions,

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leading to cases where polygamous unions are driven by family pressure rather than personal choice (Okeke, 2016:88). This subordination contradicts Kantian ethics, which emphasize treating individuals as ends in themselves rather than as means to an end. Feminist perspectives further criticize polygamy for perpetuating gender inequality, particularly in patriarchal societies (Zeitzen, 2008:176). Simone de Beauvoir's critique of the subordination of women in marriage (de Beauvoir, 2011:482) resonates with the Nigerian experience, where polygamous structures often place women in dependent roles. Research indicates that many women in polygamous marriages face economic vulnerability and emotional distress due to competition among co-wives (Alubo, 2012:56). Moreover, polygamous unions are frequently associated with limited access to education and employment opportunities for women, further entrenching gender inequality (Kabeer, 2016:200).

1. **Economic Benefits and Resource Sharing:** Polygamous families in Nigeria often benefit from shared financial responsibilities. In agrarian societies, multiple spouses contribute to farming and trade, enhancing economic stability (Shadle, 2018:56). Additionally, polygamous structures can provide financial security for women and children in areas with limited female employment opportunities (Gould et al., 2019:452).

**Social and Cultural Continuity:** Polygamy is deeply rooted in Nigerian traditions, particularly among the Hausa, Yoruba, and Fulani ethnic groups. It serves as a mechanism for strengthening family ties and alliances (Al-Krenawi, 2014:112). Among Nigerian royalty and elite families, polygamous marriages historically played a role in consolidating political influence and social status (Anderson, 2015:89).

**Increased Support for Child-Rearing:** Polygamous households provide an extended support system for children, with multiple parental figures contributing to their upbringing. Studies show that children in polygamous families benefit from a larger network of caregivers, improving their socialization and emotional development (Borgerhoff, 1998:301; Strassmann, 2005:679).

2. **Addressing Demographic Imbalances:** In regions affected by insurgency and conflict, such as northeastern Nigeria, where Boko Haram attacks have led to high male mortality rates, polygamy has been used to accommodate widows and reduce the number of unmarried women (Tertilt, 2005:1342).

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The following are the disadvantages of polygamy in Nigeria:

1. **Gender Inequality and Women's Rights Violations:** Polygamy often reinforces patriarchal dominance, limiting women's autonomy. Research indicates that women in polygamous marriages have less decision-making power and economic independence (Fenske, 2015:789). In some cases, polygamous marriages involve underage or coerced unions, raising serious ethical and legal concerns (Kabeer, 2016:200).
2. **Emotional and Psychological Distress:** Studies reveal that women in polygamous marriages report higher levels of anxiety, depression, and marital dissatisfaction due to competition among co-wives (Al-Krenawi and Slonim-Nevo, 2008:230). Unequal treatment by husbands often exacerbates household conflicts and emotional strain (Jankowiak et al., 1999:12).
3. **Legal and Ethical Challenges:** Nigeria's legal system presents complexities regarding polygamy. While it is recognized under Islamic and customary laws, it contradicts statutory marriage laws that prohibit multiple spouses (Johnson, 2019:45). This legal ambiguity creates challenges in inheritance, child custody, and marital rights, particularly for women and children in polygamous unions (Bowman, 2010:345).

**Economic Strain and Resource Competition:** While polygamous families may benefit from shared resources, they also face economic challenges. Large households require significant financial resources, and in cases where income is limited, intra-household inequalities and poverty may arise (Borgerhoff Mulder, 1998:312). In urban areas, men often struggle to provide for multiple wives and children, leading to economic instability (Strassmann, 2005:682).

The Yoruba people of southwest Nigeria have a long history of polygamy, more especially polygyny, in which a man has several wives. Although less common than in Nigeria's northern states, where Islamic Sharia law is applied, it nonetheless plays a big role in Yoruba culture. It was historically linked to agricultural labour needs and status markers within Yoruba society (Egbeolowo, 2020:232; Fasiku, 2020:191). Polygamous unions are recognized under customary law in Nigeria, providing rights related to inheritance and child custody. Although the people's oral histories show that polygamous lives were prevalent in the early days, some Yorubas valued monogamy. By the time Christian missionaries arrived, the social norm of polygamy had been

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deeply ingrained in the people's socio-cultural and economic existence. The prevalence and practices of polygamy may vary across different communities within southwestern Nigeria (Ajayi, 2011:63).

### **Research Design**

This study examines polygamy and its implications on Christianity in Southwest Nigeria using survey research techniques that combine quantitative and qualitative methods. By examining the theological, social, and moral implications of polygamy, the study seeks to evaluate the viewpoints of Christian leaders and polygamous spouses across different Christian denominations.

### **Population and Sample Size**

Christian leaders and polygamous spouses from certain Christian denominations, such as the Methodist Church, Africa Indigenous Churches, and the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion), in the southwest region of Nigeria, make up the study's target group. Selected participants received 3,000 questionnaires in all, guaranteeing a wide range of perspectives. Of them, 2,756 completed surveys were collected and analysed, resulting in a high response rate that improves the findings' dependability.

### **Data Collection Methods**

The primary instrument used in the study to collect data was a structured questionnaire. Both closed-ended and open-ended questions were included in the survey in order to obtain a thorough understanding of participants' opinions towards polygamy from a sociological, theological, and scriptural standpoint. The questionnaire was divided into several sections, covering:

- Biblical interpretations of polygamy and monogamy.
- Denominational beliefs regarding the acceptance or rejection of polygamous unions.
- Social, economic, and emotional effects of polygamy on individuals and families.
- Church policies on the inclusion of polygamous couples in leadership roles.

Participants responded using a Likert-scale format (e.g., Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) as well as multiple-choice and open-ended responses to capture a broad spectrum of opinions. The survey was conducted between October 2024 and February 2025.

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## Ethical Considerations

To maintain the study's integrity and participants' safety, this research complied with ethical standards. Prior to data collection, each participant gave their informed consent. Strict confidentiality and anonymity measures were used to guarantee that no participant could be identified by their individual replies. Respondents were free to leave the study at any time without facing any consequences, in accordance with the ethical norms of voluntary participation.

## Data Analysis

Only 2,756 copies of the questionnaire were collected and compiled out of the 3,000 copies that were given out to chosen participants, who included Christian leaders and polygamous couples from specific Christian denominations in Nigeria, including the Methodist Church, the African Indigenous Churches (AICs), Pentecostal Churches, and the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) in the southwestern part of Nigeria. The collected data was systematically analyzed using descriptive statistics, including: Frequency counts and percentages to measure respondents' views on various aspects of polygamy. Cross-tabulation analysis to compare responses across different denominational and demographic groups. Thematic analysis for open-ended responses, allowing for qualitative insights into personal experiences and theological interpretations of polygamy. The results were presented in tables, highlighting key trends and denominational differences regarding polygamy's impact on Christian practice and social structure

### Section A: Participant's Sociodemographic

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	1,259	45.7%
	Female	1,497	54.3%
Age Group	18–25	210	7.6%
	26–35	630	22.9%
	36–45	790	28.7%
	46–60	870	31.6%
	60+	256	9.3%
Marital Status	Single	480	17.4%
	Married	1,970	71.5%
	Divorced/Separated	180	6.5%
	Widowed	126	4.6%

Educational Level	Primary	89	3.2%
	Secondary	410	14.9%
	Tertiary	1,380	50.1%
	Postgraduate	680	24.7%
	None	197	7.1%
Occupation	Clergy	211	7.6%
	Trader	702	25.4%
	Civil Servant	894	32.4%
	Unemployed	204	7.4%
	Student	745	27.0%
Denomination	Methodists	671	24.3%
	Pentecostals	702	25.4%
	AICs	734	26.6%
	Anglicans	649	23.5%

**Source: Field Survey, October 2024 – February 2025**

The sociodemographic data collected for this study provides key insights into the understanding of polygamy and its implications within southwestern Nigeria. There are more females (54.3%) than males (45.7%) in the population, though the difference is not very large. Most people fall between the ages of 26 and 60, with the largest group being those aged 46–60 (31.6%). The next largest groups are 36–45 (28.7%) and 26–35 (22.9%). Younger adults aged 18–25 make up a small portion (7.6%), and older adults aged 60 and above account for 9.3%. A large majority of the respondents are married (71.5%). Single individuals make up 17.4%, while divorced/separated and widowed people represent 6.5% and 4.6%, respectively. More than half of the respondents have completed tertiary education (50.1%), and nearly a quarter have postgraduate qualifications (24.7%). Secondary education accounts for 14.9%, while only a small number have primary education (3.2%) or no formal education (7.1%). Civil servants are the most common group (32.4%), followed by students (27.0%) and traders (25.4%). The clergy and unemployed make up smaller portions at 7.6% and 7.4%, respectively. Religious affiliation is fairly balanced among the major groups. AICs have the highest share (26.6%), with Pentecostals at 25.4%, Methodists at 24.3%, and Anglicans at 23.5%. Understanding the complicated nature of polygamy requires knowledge of the population in southwestern Nigeria, which is primarily married, educated, and religiously varied, according to the research. A more comprehensive understanding

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of the socio-religious, cultural, and economic ramifications of polygamy is made possible by the combination of traditional and modern perspectives, which are impacted by variables such as education, religion, age, and employment.

### Section B: Polygamy and Its Implications on Christianity in Southwestern part of Nigeria

Options:      Agreed (A),                      Disagreed (D),              Strongly Agreed (SA),  
                     Strongly Disagreed (SD),      Undecided (U)

S/N	Question	A (%)	D (%)	SA (%)	SD (%)	U (%)
1	The Bible acknowledges polygamy in the Old Testament, but God's original design for marriage is monogamy, as stated in Genesis 2:24.	568 (20.6%)	101 (3.7%)	1761 (63.9%)	116 (4.2%)	210 (7.6%)
2	In your denomination, polygamy is considered sinful	291 (10.6%)	3 (0.1%)	2234 (81.2%)	0 (0.0%)	228 (8.3%)
3	Polygamous couples may become full members of the church.	39 (1.4%)	52 (1.9%)	2603 (94.4%)	17 (0.6%)	45 (1.6%)
4	Polygamous spouses can hold positions of leadership in the Church, including lay readers, priests or pastors, elders, department leaders, and council members.	28 (1.0%)	184 (6.7%)	91 (3.3%)	2402 (87.2%)	51 (1.9%)
5	Children from polygamous homes may lead if theologically and doctrinally sound	134 (4.9%)	0 (0.0%)	2523 (91.5%)	0 (0.0%)	99 (3.6%)
6	Polygamous converts to Christianity should keep all their wives and live harmoniously	240 (8.7%)	0 (0.0%)	2167 (78.6%)	0 (0.0%)	349 (12.7%)
7	Polygamous converts to Christianity should remain with only one wife and divorce the others.	150 (5.4%)	698 (25.3%)	53 (1.9%)	1705 (61.9%)	150 (5.4%)
9	Polygamy has had a positive impact on my life	0 (0.0%)	1389 (50.4%)	0 (0.0%)	1123 (40.7%)	244 (8.9%)
10	As a man, polygamy has positively affected my life	290	316	712	1104	334

S/N	Question	A (%)	D (%)	SA (%)	SD (%)	U (%)
		(10.5%)	(11.5%)	(25.8%)	(40.1%)	(12.1%)
11	As a woman, polygamy has positively affected my life	549 (19.9%)	990 (35.9%)	300 (10.8%)	874 (31.7%)	43 (1.7%)
12	As a child, polygamy affected me positively	0 (0.0%)	1620 (58.8%)	0 (0.0%)	1136 (41.2%)	0 (0.0%)
13	Most families have disagreements over property and inheritance, both during and after their father's lifetime in polygamous homes.	456 (16.5%)	123 (4.5%)	2021 (73.3%)	156 (5.7%)	0 (0.0%)
14	Polygamy promotes gender equality within the family	0 (0.0%)	587 (21.3%)	0 (0.0%)	1823 (66.1%)	346 (12.6%)
15	Experienced emotional strain in polygamous homes	900 (32.7%)	326 (11.8%)	1102 (40.0%)	301 (10.9%)	127 (4.6%)
16	Children in polygamous families receive equal attention/resources from their parents	322 (11.7%)	1023 (37.1%)	745 (27.0%)	501 (18.2%)	165 (5.9%)
17	Overall family harmony is strong in polygamous households	289 (10.5%)	1211 (43.9%)	338 (12.2%)	732 (26.5%)	186 (6.7%)

**Source: Field Survey, October 2024 – February 2025**

The responses to the questions on polygamy reveal a diverse range of attitudes and personal experiences that reflect both religious doctrine and lived realities. A large majority (63.9%) strongly agree that while polygamy is acknowledged in the Old Testament, God's original intention for marriage is monogamy. Only a small percentage disagree (3.7%) or strongly disagree (4.2%). Most respondents (81.2%) strongly agree that polygamy is considered sinful in their denomination. Almost no one strongly disagrees, indicating widespread consensus on this belief. A dominant portion (94.4%) strongly agree that polygamous couples may become full members of the church.

Disagreement on this point is minimal. A significant majority (87.2%) strongly disagree that polygamous spouses can h *MAHABBAH: Journal od Religion and Education 6(1)* suggesting strong disapproval of such leadership roles for polygamous individuals. An overwhelming majority (91.5%) strongly agree that children from polygamous homes may lead if theologically and doctrinally sound. There is no recorded disagreement. Most respondents (78.6%) strongly agree that polygamous converts should keep all their wives and live harmoniously. A

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smaller group (8.7%) agree, while 12.7% remain undecided. The majority (61.9%) strongly disagree with the idea that polygamous converts should divorce and remain with only one wife.

A notable minority (25.3%) disagree, and very few strongly agree (1.9%). Half of the respondents (50.4%) disagree that polygamy has had a positive impact on their lives. A considerable number (40.7%) strongly disagree, indicating mostly negative personal experiences with polygamy. Responses are mixed. While 25.8% strongly agree that polygamy positively affected them as men, 40.1% strongly disagree, and 11.5% disagree, reflecting divided male perspectives on the matter. Among women, opinions vary, though the largest group (35.9%) disagree that polygamy positively affected them. Another 31.7% strongly disagree, showing overall dissatisfaction, despite 19.9% agreeing. As children, no respondents strongly agreed or agreed that polygamy affected them positively. A majority (58.8%) disagreed, and 41.2% strongly disagreed, highlighting a predominantly negative childhood experience in polygamous households.

Most respondents (73.3%) strongly agree that polygamous families face disputes over inheritance and property. Only 4.5% disagree and 5.7% strongly disagree. A majority (66.1%) strongly disagree that polygamy promotes gender equality. An additional 21.3% disagree, showing general opposition to this idea. A large number (40.0%) strongly agree that emotional strain is experienced in polygamous homes. Another 32.7% agree, confirming emotional challenges are common in such families. Opinions on equal parental attention in polygamous homes are mixed. 37.1% disagree and 27.0% strongly agree, with other responses spread across agreement and disagreement. A significant number (43.9%) disagree that polygamous families enjoy strong harmony. Only 12.2% strongly agree, while 26.5% strongly disagree, suggesting general concern about harmony in polygamous households.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings from this study provide valuable insights into the persistence, transformation, and perception of polygamy in southwestern Nigeria. A majority of the survey respondents were female (54.3%), highlighting the importance of women's perspectives in examining polygamous practices. While some women perceive polygamy as beneficial—offering enhanced social status, economic security, and shared domestic responsibilities, particularly when the husband is affluent—others report significant psychological distress and relational tensions (Shaiful-

Bahari et al., 2021:823; Naseer et al., 2021:8). Notably, over 60% of participants aged 36 to 60 reported extensive lived experience in polygamous households, providing critical insights into marriage dynamics and generational shifts. With 28% of its population in polygamous unions, Nigeria ranks fifth globally in terms of polygamy prevalence. Although the Age of Marriage Act of 2004 stipulates that males must be at least 21 and females at least 18 to marry, many customary laws lack such specifications, often permitting marriages under 18 with parental consent (Abhulimhen-Iyoha, 2023:72). Research further indicates that older individuals are more likely to uphold traditional norms within polygamous settings, while younger generations increasingly challenge these practices, especially when they conflict with contemporary ideals of equality and personal freedom (Oyeniya, 2015:143).

The majority of respondents (71.5%) are currently married, according to marital status data, indicating that polygamy is a lived reality in contemporary marriage contexts rather than just a historical or cultural artefact. Although polygamy is frequently thought of as a declining practice, research shows that socioeconomic incentives and cultural norms keep it functionally relevant in many African societies (Obielosi, 2018:88). The sample's inclusion of divorced, separated, and widowed people provides insight into the emotional strain and instability that polygamous marriages can occasionally cause. Polygamy can increase divorce rates owing to issues such as jealousy, favouritism, and resentment among co-wives. However, some persons in polygamous marriage may be able to negotiate these problems and sustain the partnership by emphasising the well-being of children and making concessions to prevent divorce in Southwest Nigeria (Naseer et al., 2021:10).

The respondents' educational backgrounds provide valuable insight into their perspectives on marital systems. The data reveals a predominantly well-educated population, with 50.1% having attained tertiary education and 24.7% holding postgraduate degrees. While only 7.1% of respondents reported having no formal education, this minority remains significant, as their views are likely shaped by deep-rooted religious and cultural norms that often support polygamy. Higher levels of education are typically associated with a preference for monogamy, gender equity, and individual autonomy in marriage, which correlates with a declining acceptance of polygamy (Nwaoga, 2020:205). Gbeneneh and his colleagues further observed that although some studies link polygamy to lower educational outcomes for children, others suggest that education itself can influence the prevalence of polygamy. In some contexts, polygamous families may provide

broader social support networks, which can enhance children's educational experiences by offering diverse role models and shared resources (Gbeneneh, 2024:140; Asigril et al., 2023:15).

Diverse attitudes are also revealed by occupational status. Given that public institutions frequently comply with national legal standards that discourage polygamy, the largest group (32.4%), civil servants, probably represent formal, state-influenced attitudes towards monogamy in southwest Nigeria. Traders (25.4%) might be more rooted in local cultural norms and might be in favour of polygamous arrangements for familial or financial reasons. Since higher education settings often encourage critical evaluation of conventional norms, students (27.0%) are expected to represent progressive viewpoints (Ajayi, 2007:59). 7.6% of clergy are both interpreters and influencers of religious teachings on marriage; their opinions frequently mirror denominational doctrine, which can vary from outright rejection in mainline Protestant and Pentecostal churches to tacit acceptance in African Independent Churches (AICs) (Aina, 2015:112). In Nigeria, there's a complex relationship between polygamy and occupation status, often influenced by economic factors and social norms. Regions with high polygamy rates tend to be poorer, and this can impact occupation choices, often leading to greater dependence on agriculture and informal work for men. Women in polygamous unions may face challenges in accessing education and employment opportunities, further limiting their economic choices. As Nigeria's economy develops, increased opportunities in formal employment, entrepreneurship, and education have led some individuals to seek to improve their socioeconomic status through avenues other than traditional polygamous marriages (Nnabugwu, 2024:80; Okeke & Onwuasoigwe, 2024:4).

African Indigenous Churches (AICs) (26.6%), Pentecostals (25.4%), Methodists (24.3%), and Anglicans (23.5%) make up a fairly balanced distribution of religious affiliation. An essential comparative viewpoint on theological stances is offered by this diversity. Pentecostal and mainline denominations place a strong emphasis on monogamy, citing New Testament teachings (Chitando, 2019:134), while AICs frequently accept polygamy as part of a larger cultural theology (Ukpong, 1999:97). Though some have shown more flexibility in their approaches, African Indigenous Churches (AICs) in Nigeria usually oppose polygamy. Although many AICs, like the African Church, explicitly forbid polygamy among clergy, the attitude towards lay members can differ. Some AICs, like the African Universal Church, arose in part out of a desire to create a more African-centric Christianity, including addressing cultural practices like polygamy. While still upholding Christian values on monogamy, some AICs are now reassessing their approach and

moving towards greater understanding and acceptance of polygamists (Nmah, 2012:42; Ejenobo, 2010:60; Alawode, 2024:150; Zakka, et al, 2021:29). These variations in denomination highlight how important religion is in supporting or undermining cultural norms.

The responses gathered from participants offer a nuanced picture of how polygamy is perceived within the socio-religious landscape of Christianity in southwestern Nigeria. The data reveals a striking tension between biblical recognition of polygamy in the Old Testament and a dominant belief in monogamy as God's original design for marriage. A significant majority (84.5%) affirmed monogamy as the divine ideal, referencing Genesis 2:24 as the theological foundation for this view. This aligns with broader Christian teachings that present monogamy as the normative framework for marriage, even though patriarchal figures in the Old Testament practiced polygamy (Chitando, 2019:132).

The assertion that polygamy is considered sinful by most denominations was supported by 81.2% of respondents. This overwhelming consensus highlights the enduring influence of Christian doctrines that uphold moral standards based on New Testament ethics (Ukpong, 1999:101). The minimal dissent (0.1%) and limited uncertainty (8.3%) reflect the clarity and consistency of denominational positions, particularly among Pentecostal and mainline Protestant groups, which emphasize marital fidelity and monogamy. **The minority who considers polygamy permissible may belong to denominations that incorporate traditional cultural values into their religious practices (Brockbank, 2019:215).**

A large majority (94.4%) agreed that polygamous couples should be granted full church membership, suggesting that while polygamy is doctrinally rejected, the pastoral response tends toward inclusion. This reflects a practical theology that seeks to welcome believers irrespective of their family structure, possibly rooted in the church's mission to evangelize and disciple rather than alienate (Obielosi, 2018:120). However, this inclusivity does not extend to church leadership, where 87.2% opposed allowing polygamous spouses to serve in leadership positions. This distinction reveals a widely held belief that leadership must exemplify the highest moral and marital standards (1 Timothy 3:2), which traditionally exclude polygamous individuals (Aina, 2015: 117; Stone, 2007:139).

When the question shifted to the children of polygamous unions, a more compassionate perspective emerged. An overwhelming 91.5% supported the idea that children from such homes could hold leadership positions, provided they are theologically sound. This indicates a move away

from inherited stigma toward merit-based inclusion, consistent with Christian teachings on individual faith and calling (Ajayi, 2011:63).

The issue of how polygamous converts should relate to their wives post-conversion revealed a preference for preserving family unity. Most respondents (78.6%) favored maintaining all marital bonds, a view that reflects African communal values and the practical difficulty of dissolving established familial units. **This suggests that while monogamy is upheld as the ideal, Christian communities may be willing to accommodate existing polygamous families to prevent social and economic disruption (Anderson, 2015:85).** This perspective aligns with scholarly observations that African Christianity often prioritizes relational stability and social harmony (Oyeniya, 2015:150). Conversely, the idea that converts should divorce all but one wife was strongly rejected (61.9%), showing discomfort with rigid theological prescriptions that disrupt familial structures.

**Regarding the overall quality of life, men's responses were almost evenly divided, with 46.7% stating that polygamy had a positive impact and 50.6% reporting a negative impact. In contrast, only 32.5% of women viewed polygamy positively, while 41% stated it had negatively affected their lives, and 26.5% were undecided. The most striking data came from children, with 83.8% stating that polygamy negatively affected their quality of life, primarily due to parental neglect, inheritance conflicts, and emotional distress (Fenske, 2015:789).** Concerning children raised in polygamous homes, 58.8% believed that their lives were negatively impacted. This reflects concerns about emotional neglect, sibling rivalry, and identity confusion, issues well documented in studies of polygamous family structures (Nwaoga, 2020:211). The complexity of these households often leads to property and inheritance disputes, a reality confirmed by 73.3% of respondents. These disputes reveal structural flaws in polygamous systems, where multiple lineages compete for limited resources, often leading to prolonged conflicts and litigations (Obielosi, 2018:97; **Bowman, 2010:345**).

The perception of gender inequality in polygamous homes was also prominent, with 66.1% disagreeing that such families promote equality. This points to deeply embedded patriarchal dynamics, where male authority is reinforced and women compete for recognition and resources (Aina, 2015:109). Additionally, 32.7% reported emotional strain as a significant outcome of polygamy, especially among women. **Previous studies confirm that competition among co-wives often leads to marital dissatisfaction and psychological distress (Al-Krenawi and**

**Slonim-Nevo, 2008:231**). These findings reflect the gendered burden of polygamy, where emotional, social, and spiritual well-being is often compromised. Lastly, the question on family harmony in polygamous households showed that 70.4% of respondents did not perceive such homes as harmonious. This is consistent with studies that have noted high levels of interpersonal conflict, rivalry, and distrust within polygamous settings, despite cultural efforts to maintain cohesion (Chitando, 2019:140). The minority (22.7%) who viewed these homes positively may represent cases where resources, mutual respect, and spiritual maturity have enabled functional coexistence.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Polygamy remains a contentious issue in Southwest Nigeria, with deep cultural roots but significant contradictions with Christian teachings. The study finds that while many churches oppose polygamy, they still allow polygamous individuals to be members. However, polygamous families often face emotional and financial challenges, particularly affecting women and children. As Nigeria continues to evolve, striking a balance between cultural traditions and Christian principles remains a key challenge. Addressing the social and economic consequences of polygamy through church support and legal reforms is essential for fostering a more equitable and stable society.

The study explores polygamy and its implications on Christianity in Southwest Nigeria, considering sociological, theological, and ethical perspectives. While polygamy has cultural and economic significance, it often contradicts Christian doctrine, which largely promotes monogamy. The study examines biblical interpretations of polygamy, church policies, and the social and emotional effects of polygamous marriages. A survey of Christian leaders and polygamous couples in Southwest Nigeria reveals that most respondents view polygamy as sinful, though many churches allow polygamous individuals to be full members. However, polygamous spouses are generally restricted from leadership roles. The study also highlights issues such as gender inequality, emotional distress, and property disputes in polygamous households. The following recommendations were made:

1. **Church Inclusivity:** Churches should continue to welcome polygamous individuals as full members while maintaining monogamy as the ideal.

2. **Leadership Policies:** Churches should clarify and enforce leadership restrictions for polygamous individuals to uphold doctrinal consistency.
3. **Support for Women and Children:** Churches and community organizations should provide economic and psychological support for women and children in polygamous families to mitigate emotional and financial struggles.
4. **Educational Programs:** Christian institutions should educate members on the theological and ethical implications of polygamy while promoting monogamy as a biblical ideal.
5. **Legal Reforms:** The Nigerian government should ensure legal protections for women and children in polygamous households, particularly in areas of inheritance and marital rights.

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