

An Economist's Perspective on Polygyny Shoshana Grossbard

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Abstract

A Demand and Supply analysis of marriage that assumes that marriage markets are free leads to the conclusion that polygyny adds to women's value and enhances their well-being. However, wherever polygyny is found institutions are in place to curtail women's freedom and ability to obtain the very best partners in marriage: marriages are arranged for very young women, brideprice is often paid at marriage, employment for women is limited or prohibited, and women's sexual and emotional fulfillment is discouraged by ideological or physical means. Polygyny, an asymmetrical form of plural marriage, tends to serve the interests of the men likely to be polygynists at the expense of other groups. Having the power to institute and maintain polygyny these men also have the power to institute means of preventing women from capturing the gains that they would obtain had they been free to choose their marriage partners. There is no single example of a society that allows polygyny, an asymmetric form of polygamy, and simultaneously gives women the freedom to choose their marriage partners as commonly practiced in Western democracies. Worldwide, in the cultures and societies that have embraced it, polygyny is associated with undesirable economic, societal, physical, and emotional factors related to women's wellbeing. Many of the societies that have tolerated the practice of polygamy simultaneously recognize its harm in the form of institutions that limit the extent that polygyny can hurt women.

Introduction. This article is based on a report prepared for the Supreme Court of British Columbia, Canada, when it was considering whether to eliminate Canada's anti-polygamy law (Grossbard 2010). It analyzes polygyny (many wives), not polyandry (many husbands) and relies on two assumptions often used since Becker's (1973) path-breaking economic analyses of marriage: (1) marriage is an institution that organizes household production, such production including giving birth, raising children, homemaking and many more activities, and (2) marriage markets exist.

The economic analysis presented here starts with a Demand and Supply analysis of marriage pioneered by University of Chicago economist Gary Becker. From this analysis Becker (1973, 1981, 2006) concludes that polygyny adds to women's value based on a third assumption: marriage markets are free in the sense that the participants are free to choose and equilibrium prices are allowed to be established where markets clear. The results of a marriage market analysis depend strongly on whether all participants in marriage markets are free to maximize their own wellbeing. However, cultures allowing polygamy invariably also have laws and customs that prevent women from capturing the gains from marriage that could have accrued to them had they been free to choose their husbands. This paper lists and discusses some of these institutions. It then documents some of the harmful effects of polygyny for women and briefly discusses institutions aimed at alleviating this harm.

From the perspective of political economy institutions are created and maintained due to the interests and influence of various groups in society. This also holds for marital institutions such as monogamy laws and bride price. The men who have an interest in establishing and

maintaining polygyny also have an interest in establishing institutions that prevent women from capturing the gains from marriage that polygyny could have generated in free marriage markets.

Gary Becker's argument. When awarding him the Nobel prize in economics the Swedish academy mentioned Becker's contributions to the economics of the family, which include his economic analyses of polygamy. Becker's (1973, 1981) Demand and Supply analysis of marriage markets is based on more detailed assumptions also found in other applications of Demand and Supply analysis, including that (1) brides and grooms can potentially substitute for each other (or be substituted for each other, if others decide about who marries whom and when) and (2) there is competition in the market. In this case, men compete among each other to obtain a wife, while women compete among each other to obtain a husband.

Becker considers a marriage market for brides in which the supply is by women. The existence of polygyny does not change the number of women and therefore the supply of brides. In this market the demand is by men who would possibly marry these women. Demand is based on the marginal productivity of women in household production and the number of men. Polygyny allows men to enter the market multiple times, adding to the demand. As a result, assuming that markets for wives are competitive and allowed to clear at the intersection of demand and supply, the higher demand will cause higher market values. Becker concluded that women's market value as brides will rise if polygamy is permitted.

While writing my doctoral dissertation under Becker's supervision I supported Becker's conclusion with evidence from cross-cultural comparisons (Grossbard-Shechtman 1978a, 1978b, 1980). First, I found that societies with polygyny are more likely to have a bride price (sometimes called bride wealth) system than monogamous societies and interpreted that association as evidence of the higher value of women in marriage markets with polygamy. Becker liked it and cited that part of my dissertation (Grossbard-Shechtman 1978b) in the following context in his *Treatise on the Family*:

My analysis of efficient, competitive marriage markets indicates...that the income of women and the competition by men for wives would be greater when polygyny is greater if the incidence of polygyny had been determined mainly by the relative marginal contribution of women to output. This view is supported by the fact that bride prices are more common and generally higher in societies with a greater incidence of polygyny... (Becker 1981, p 56).

Second, I argued that women's lower age at marriage in polygynous societies also serves as evidence that women have a higher value in these societies than in monogamy. Another student of Becker in the 1970s, Michael Keeley, had associated early age at marriage with higher value in marriage markets in the context of the U.S.A. Based on a Beckerian Demand and Supply analysis Keeley (1977) predicted that the more individual Americans were to gain from being married, the younger they married. His econometric analysis confirmed some of his predictions. For instance, he found that in the 1960s two groups with higher expected gains from marriage married younger: men with higher wages and women with lower wages. I thought of applying Keeley's insights to polygyny:

When women gain more from marriage, they are also likely to marry younger. This seems indeed to be the case: women's average age at marriage is 13 or 14 among the Hausa and the Kanuri of Eastern Nigeria, societies with widespread polygyny. The Tallensi, another West Africa tribe, are slightly less polygynous and their daughters marry somewhat later. Here the average female age at marriage is 16 and 17. On the whole, women marry considerably earlier in polygynous areas like Africa and the

Moslem world than in monogamous Europe and America. Polygyny also raises the difference in mean age at marriage of men and women (Grossbard-Shechtman 1978a, p. 36; 1978b).

To his credit, Becker did not cite this piece of “evidence.”

When Marriage Markets are not Free. Marriage markets may never be free. They certainly are far from free in polygynous societies. The following institutions that undermine women’s freedom to choose their partners tend to be correlated with the existence of polygyny.

Child brides. Limitations on women’s freedom start with these societies marrying their daughters when they are close to the onset of puberty. Could women marrying at age 13 possibly be better off than women who had a chance to wait until they were closer to age 20? Anthropological evidence indicates that in Maiduguri, Nigeria, 13-year old girls have very little choice about when they marry and to whom (Cohen 1971). Elsewhere, in my own econometric study of individuals living in either polygamous or monogamous Nigerian households (Grossbard 1976, Grossbard-Shechtman 1980), I had assumed that women prefer monogamy and found that they were more able to achieve their monogamy goal when they were in their early twenties than when they are teenagers.

If women are forced to marry, it prevents them from taking advantage of the increased competition among potential grooms created by the possibility of polygynous marriages. Becker’s argument about the value of polygyny to women will hold in a society where the average age at marriage is 14 only if parents are perfectly capable of representing their young daughters’ best long run interests.

There is evidence that women in polygynous households in North America also marry at particularly young ages and are substantially younger than their husbands (see the evidence brought to the court of British Columbia in 2010 and 2011, Henrich 2010). Not only are young girls forced too young into marriage likely to suffer but such a system increases the likelihood of early widowhood and financial hardship for women later in life.

Brideprice. The existence of a brideprice system is likely to add to women’s inability to take advantage of their market value in a polygynous society. Becker (1981) and Grossbard (1978a, 1978b) assumed that women benefit from a *brideprice* payment, a payment that men make for getting married. In reality this is rarely the case. Where brideprice is exchanged, it typically consists of men paying fathers for the right to marry their daughters. If forced arranged marriages are the standard the possibility of earning brideprice by marrying a daughter off often places the father’s need for income above the daughter’s best interest.

Bride price systems go hand in hand with *child marriages*. It is easier for relatives to marry women off against their will if they are very young. Furthermore, fathers often can’t afford to feed their adolescent daughters and ‘sell’ them as brides as a means of raising income.

[12]

A bride price system is likely to be particularly harmful to women if a society allows brideprice to be refundable, as is the case in Uganda. It has been found that when brideprice is refundable there are stricter standards of fidelity for women imposed on women than on men.

[13] This creates a sense of unfairness in marriage.

Polygamy and bride price also go hand in hand with *arranged marriage*. If we compare monogamous countries with countries where polygamy is legal we observe a much higher

frequency of arranged marriage in polygamous societies. In particular, large proportions of young couples in Africa and the Indian subcontinent have arranged marriages, and most of the countries in which they live have legalized polygamy. To impose arranged marriages on their children societies typically use violence or the threat of violence.

We do not know whether the existence of polygamy caused these three other institutions (bride price, child marriage, and arranged marriage), or if causality runs the other way. The association between polygamy and these three institutions could be spurious in the sense that a fifth factor could be responsible for polygyny as well as bride price, child marriage and forced marriage. Regardless, it is revealing that cross-culturally polygamy is associated with these three features that are unequivocally undesirable from the perspective of young women wanting to reach maximum happiness in their lifetime.

Seclusion of women. Many societies, including Saudi Arabia and the Kanuris of Nigeria, practice both purdah and polygamy (Cohen 1971). The institution of purdah limits women's freedom of movement and typically means that women don't participate in the labor force. This makes them more dependent on their husbands financially. The Canadian polygamous society of Bountiful does not have 'purdah' but its geographic isolation creates a distance from the rest of Canadian society and makes it difficult for women to get jobs (Campbell 2005) and finance themselves out of unwanted marriages.

Deemphasis on romantic love. Cultures that adopt polygyny also tend to discourage romantic love. For example, this is the case among the Kanuris (Cohen 1970). In the case of the FLDS of Canada or the U.S.A., the young are taught to marry out of religious duty and not to expect much personal satisfaction (Bramham 2009). This de-emphasis of romantic love is likely to hurt women more than men to the extent that women place more emphasis on romantic love than men. Some consumption preferences in democratic industrialized societies reveal more of a taste for romance among women than among men. For example, most readers of Harlequin romantic novels are women and what is commonly called 'chick flicks' tend to be romantic movies (Wikipedia 2011).

Female genital mutilation. Many of the same societies that have polygamy also have female genital mutilation, an institution that reduces women's potential for a happy married life.^[17] In communities where polygyny is prominent, female genital mutilation is partially intended as a tool to curb women's sex drive. This limits women's ability to optimize their lifestyle and satisfaction in life. In case of married women, it also eases the pressure on the husband to satisfy all of his wives sexually Rahman and Toubia (2000). In polygynous societies women have been found to justify the custom of female genital mutilation based on the belief that it increases the sexual pleasure of men and therefore reduces the chance of their husband taking another wife (Gruenbaum 2001).

Easy divorce also tends to be directly associated with polygyny and tends to place married and divorced women in a position of vulnerability, thereby limiting their freedom to choose the best possible partner. For example, the Kanuris of Nigeria have very easy divorce and high rates of polygamy. Divorce tends to be relatively easy to perform in Muslim societies, and these societies are also typically accepting polygamy. In the case of Judaism, the rabbis who outlawed polygamy in the 11th century also gave more protection to women at divorce (Grossbard-Shechtman 1986). Easy divorce could also be detrimental to women (Grossbard-Shechtman 1993). For example, after the introduction of no-fault divorce in California divorce became easier and women's property settlements went down (Becker 1981). Also, when laws

regulating the division of property in case of divorce offer less protection to women, women have more of a tendency to have children out-of-couple (Ekert-Jaffe and Grossbard 2008).

The Political Economy of Polygyny. The high value of women in marriage markets in polygynous societies is expected to increase men's incentives to control women by way of political and religious institutions, such as early arranged marriages (Grossbard-Shechtman 1993, Guttentag and Secord (1983). Asymmetric polygyny is clearly instituted by men. Would any society where both men and women influence the legal process equally approve laws that allow men to take plural wives but does not give this option to women? This asymmetric form of polygamy reflects men's control of the political/cultural system that also establishes and maintains marriage institutions.

If men design their society's rules they will not institute polygyny unless they find ways to prevent women from capturing the high market value that would accrue to them if marriage market participants were free to marry whom they want. They then also allow child marriages, brideprice, female genital mutilation, and other institutions mentioned in the previous section.

It is very possible that brideprice originated when polygyny was allowed as a means to help marriage markets clear without allowing women to capture a high market value. With women's access to the gain from marriage set at a maximum level (the equivalent of a price ceiling) shortages of women would occur as women (and their families) would be reluctant to enter marriage. As argued by Becker (1981) brideprice gives further incentives for families to supply their daughters as brides. Using the analogy between marriage markets and housing markets, brideprice is the equivalent of lump sums that new tenants pay to either other tenants or to landlords in order to access scarce and coveted rent-controlled housing. In the case of housing landlords control access to housing. In the case of most polygynous societies, men control other men's access to the women they can marry.

The men who control the political economy and the economy of a polygynous society will also limit women's ability to earn income, as it would increase their freedom to achieve personal happiness. This helps explain why these societies have purdah and why the FLDS live in isolated communities with few employment opportunities for women. The main industry in Bountiful is logging, a male-dominated industry. When African immigrants practice polygyny in France it is also frequently the case that women are limited in their freedom of choice, be it as a result of early forced marriage, illegal status, or lack of employment opportunities (Conseil du statut de la femme 2010).

If men institute polygyny and prevent women from having an equal voice in the political economy, it follows that detrimental consequences of polygyny are likely to be found for women.

Harmful Effects of Polygyny. *Jealousy.* Within polygamous societies it has been observed that polygamy is associated with high levels of jealousy among co-wives (Al-Krenawi et al. 1997, Al-Krenawi et al. 2001). This makes sense to the extent that men in polygamous households divide their attention among more than one wife. Women seem to be concerned about the constant threat of being reduced to the second wife position (M'Salha 2001).

Women's psychological health problems. Polygamy has been associated with psychological distress. It has been reported that senior wives expressed great distress when their husbands took another wife (Al-Krenawi 2001).

Early widowhood. By contributing to a lower age of marriage for women and a larger age disparity between husband and wife, polygyny increases the likelihood that women become widows at an early age.

Women are not the only ones likely to suffer from polygyny. Children and men unable to find wives are also likely to suffer.

Detrimental impact on children. Polygyny also tends to be associated with health problems in children. For example, a positive cross-sectional association between polygyny and child mortality has been documented (Amey 2002, Gyimah 2009). It has also been documented that polygamist men tend to spend their money on having more children and investing little in their education, as opposed to having fewer children with higher levels of human capital (Gould et al. 2008).

Detrimental impact on single men. In polygynous societies some men remain unmarried and are likely to suffer. As long as the population grows fast and life expectancy is low young men can hope that they will be able to marry by the time they reach a certain age. Young men also seem to suffer from polygyny among the FLDS of Bountiful (Bramham 2009).

Expressed opinions. In light of these arguments, it is not surprising that when interviewed, very few women in both Mali and South Africa—countries where polygyny is prevalent—said they look favorably upon polygamy (Dangor 2001, Madhavan 2004). Some political actions are also consistent with the adverse effects for women. For example, educated African women are often actively fighting for bans on polygamy. A recent survey of South Africans found that sixty-four percent of men disagreed with having more than one wife and 83% of women disagreed (Mail and Guardian 2010).

Institutions that indirectly point to problems caused by polygyny. A number of the institutions found in polygynous societies can be interpreted as alleviating some of the problematic features of polygyny mentioned above.

Limits on number of wives. Most societies allowing polygamy limit the number of wives that are allowed per husband. Following Islamic law many of them limit the number of wives to four. Implicitly, this recognizes that polygamy can be detrimental and needs to be restricted. The harm caused by polygamy does not necessarily fall on women. It could also fall on men who may find it difficult to secure a wife when they have to compete with potential polygamists.

Rotation. It is the custom among the Kanuris of Nigeria that a husband rotates among his wives: he takes turns sleeping in each wife's home following a fixed schedule that allocates equal time to each wife (Cohen 1971). Such regulation appears to be the result of the wives' suffering from their husband's attention being divided among multiple wives.

Encouragement of cooperation in household production among the various wives. Giving authority to the senior wife is one way conflicts among co-wives are reduced (Gage-Brandon 1992).

Separate dwellings for each wife, possibly meaning that one wife is in the countryside and one in the city (Clignet and Sween 1974).

Sororal polygyny. Sisters may be less likely to fight with each other than unrelated co-wives. Murdock (1949) found that 70 of the 193 polygynous societies he surveyed had sororal polygyny.

The existence of these 'remedial' institutions indicates that there are problems with polygyny from the point of view of women's wellbeing.

Concluding assessment. If marriage markets were free and all agents were free to choose and follow their best interest the natural economic consequence of polygyny would be that women's market value and well-being would increase. However, women in polygynous societies do not realize the economic benefit of their greater value. Rather, women's freedom to manage their own economic circumstance and destiny tends to be reduced in polygynous

civilizations, to a large extent the result of early arranged marriages, which are so prevalent in these societies, along with the practice of brideprice, limited job opportunities for women and de-emphasis on sexual fulfillment. Lack of protection in case of divorce adds to women's undesirable circumstances observed in these societies. Worldwide, in the cultures and societies that have embraced it, polygyny is associated with undesirable economic, societal, physical, and emotional factors related to women's wellbeing. Many of the societies that have tolerated the practice of polygamy simultaneously recognize its harm in the form of institutions that limit the extent that polygyny can hurt women.

The undesirable outcomes associated with the institution of polygyny don't contradict the value of a marriage market analysis. Instead, they indicate that marriage markets are not free. From a political economy perspective, it makes sense that men would institute polygyny as well as means to prevent women from capturing the gains that they would obtain if they were free to choose their marriage partners. There is no single example of a society that allows polygyny, an asymmetric form of polygamy, and simultaneously gives women the freedom to choose their marriage partners as commonly practiced in Western democracies. From this perspective the FLDS polygynists of British Columbia are not very different from the Kanuri of Nigeria.

The British Columbia Superior Court judge who ruled that the ban on polygamy should not be lifted (Supreme Court of British Columbia, 2011) found some of the arguments presented here convincing. I hope his decision prevails for many decades. I don't think polygyny should be legalized. However, social experiments should be allowed. If entire communities of men and women voluntarily choose to practice polygyny, allow their sons and daughters to marry when they want and to whom they want and encourage them to obtain the skills needed for personal success, and this goes on for at least three generations, then the ban on polygyny should be reexamined. However, given that all existing polygynous societies—including those in North America—are characterized by multiple institutions that limit women's freedom and wellbeing, I am very skeptical that such hypothetical free polygynous communities will ever originate, and if they do, I doubt that the third generation will continue to give complete freedom of choice to its members.

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