

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Marriage history, early union, and domestic violence: Understanding women's entry into polygynous marriages in Somalia

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Abstract

Polygyny shaped by cultural and religious norms is prevalent among Somalis. Systematic research on polygyny is scant. This study, therefore, examines the prevalence and determinants of polygyny among Somali women. The study draws on a pooled sample of 10,601 ever-married women from the 2006 and 2011 Somali Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys. Descriptive statistics and multivariable binary logistic regression were utilized. Overall, about 20% of the women were in polygynous marriages, a proportion that was higher among women with more children. Being in a polygynous marriage was also associated with early marriage, remarriage, being married to older husbands, and rural residence. Women from Somaliland were less likely to be in polygynous marriages compared to those from other parts of Somalia. Nonetheless, justifying domestic violence was not associated with being in a polygynous marriage. There is a call for the promotion of empowerment of women and investigations into the lived, psychological, and socioeconomic consequences of polygyny among Somali women. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2025; 29 [11]: 136-144).

Keywords: polygyny, early marriage, marriage patterns, marital history, Somali women

Résumé

La polygamie, façonnée par des normes culturelles et religieuses, est répandue chez les Somaliens. Les recherches systématiques sur ce sujet sont rares. Cette étude examine donc sa prévalence et ses déterminants chez les femmes somaliennes. Elle s'appuie sur un échantillon de 10 601 femmes non célibataires issues de l'Enquête par grappes à indicateurs multiples somalienne de 2006 et 2011. Des statistiques descriptives et une régression logistique binaire multivariée ont été utilisées. Globalement, environ 20 % des femmes étaient mariées polygames, un taux plus élevé chez les femmes ayant eu plus d'enfants. Être mariée polygame était également associé au mariage précoce, au remariage, au mariage avec un mari plus âgé et à la résidence rurale. Les femmes du Somaliland étaient moins susceptibles d'être mariées polygames que celles de Somalie. Néanmoins, justifier la violence domestique n'était pas associé à la polygamie. Il existe un appel à promouvoir l'autonomisation des femmes et à mener des enquêtes sur les conséquences vécues, psychologiques et socioéconomiques de la polygamie chez les femmes somaliennes. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2025; 29 [11]: 136-144).

Mots-clés: polygamie, mariage précoce, modes de mariage, histoire matrimoniale, femmes somaliennes

Introduction

Polygyny is a form of marriage in which a man is married to two or more wives at the same time. It is different from serial monogamy, in which a man marries different women at different times.^{1,2} Polygyny is common in Sub-Saharan nations, and the rate of women under polygynous marriages ranges from 16% to 48%.³ Recent studies suggest that the proportions range from 1.6% in South Africa to 40% in Chad.⁴ After controlling for other determinants, studies suggest that the odds of being in a polygynous relationship have decreased in most

countries.⁵ However, earlier research indicated that an increase in the number of wives for polygynous men could offset a reduction in polygyny.⁶

There are several theoretical explanations for polygyny across societies. In non-state societies, high male mortality through war is the major determinant of polygynous marriage. In state societies, pathogen stress is the major determinant¹. The African nations have economic reasons for their extensive practice of polygyny. Polygyny is cost-saving for men because several wives put authority of the fields in the hands of the husband. It is also an indication of grandeur that puts him on

top of others, as it indicates his capability of maintaining a large household.⁷

Somalia, like many Sub-Saharan African nations, practices the tradition of polygyny, shaped by cultural and religious norms. While love, compassion, and companionship are most valued in marriage, for Somalis, it also serves many social functions like creating social ties through interclan unions, strengthening alliances, and even curing conflicts between clans.⁸⁻¹² Marriage is also perceived as the continuation of lineage and position in society due to the fact that many children, particularly sons, are thought of as a power and support for the father's clan.¹³

Although there is scant high-quality data on the prevalence and patterns of polygyny among Somalis, existing estimates show considerable variation. In accordance with previous estimation, it was assumed that 40% of married Somali men have two or more wives.¹⁴ Concerning the percentage of women in polygynous unions, a study of 2662 married Somali women from the 1983 Somali Family Health Survey estimated that around 17% of women were in polygynous unions.¹⁵ Among nomadic women, 30% to 40% of married women had a co-wife.¹⁶ More recent research with 435 women estimated that 28% of women were in polygynous unions.¹⁷

Polygynous unions in Somalia were practiced only by rich men, religious men, and elderly men. However, the practice gradually gained its way.¹³ Both Islam and Somali culture permit polygynous marriage, which allows a man to have more than one wife at a time, subject to specific conditions, for instance, if the man can provide for his wives and treat them equitably and justly.^{13,18} Apart from religious reasons, a Somali man may practice polygyny for various reasons, such as to have more children, or when the first wife cannot conceive,^{8,13} or based on the rooted belief that the woman decides the gender of the child, if the wife bears only daughters, the husband marries another woman so that he can have sons.⁸ The Somali civil war increased forced and early marriage among young, vulnerable women from marginalized groups. Daughters were married off to dominant clan armed groups in return for protection⁸. It is therefore likely that many young

women could have been married under polygynous arrangements.

Polygynous marriage has a profound effect on family structure, resource distribution, and women's mental health. Polygynous wives have higher chances of suffering from depression than monogamous wives.¹⁹ In Sub-Saharan African cultures, polygyny correlates with increased STI and poor communication between spouses.²⁰ A study that examined the rate of intimate partner violence (IPV) in 16 countries indicated that wives who were in polygynous relationships had a higher IPV rate in eight countries.⁴ The first wife in Somali society is likely to have control over finances in the house, while the younger wife receives more attention from the husband, which leads to friction and competition among co-wives.¹³ The jealousy is evoked by an unequal balance of money and affection between wives.²¹ The other effects of polygyny on the Somali women are reduced scores in the desire, arousal, orgasm, and satisfaction sub-domains. Moreover, women from polygynous unions have higher levels of depression and anxiety.¹⁷

Marriage and trends thereof in Somalia have not been studied systematically.¹¹ While common, Somali polygyny is a less-studied topic. To date, there has been little multivariable examination of the determinants of Somali women's likelihood of being in polygynous unions. Moreover, existing research on polygyny focuses primarily on husbands' perspectives, economic and cultural explanations, with little focus on women's lived experiences of living in polygynous unions, marriage market forces, and gendered power disparity. For instance, the theory of gender power imbalance²² suggests that uneven gender relations reinforce male dominance and gender violence. Polygynous marriage, in this regard, may further support male dominance and increase acceptance of domestic violence by wives. Somali society is patriarchal, and the power disparity may also restrict Somali women's marriage choices further. Moreover, in accordance with the marriage market theory,²³ individuals maximize returns, and women who have already experienced marriages can face challenges to secure monogamous remarriages, making a union in polygyny the best option. Early

marriage can also increase the likelihood of polygyny because of family arrangements or women's limited options.²⁴ In light of this discussion, the study empirically investigates the prevalence and patterns of polygynous marriages among Somali women, highlighting sociodemographic features and a foundation for future research. Utilizing pooled data of the 2006 and 2011 Somali Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), the study specifically aims to: 1. Provide an estimate of the prevalence of women's polygynous marriages and the mean number of co-wives. 2. Examine whether marriage within a polygynous relationship is associated with marital history, early marriage, and justification of domestic violence towards women while controlling for other sociodemographic covariates.

Methods

Data

The current study utilized data from the 2006 and 2011 Somali MICS. The Somali MICS is a nationally representative sample to quantify children's and women's well-being in Somalia. In 2006, there were 5,969 households, and 6,764 women aged 15-49 years were interviewed. The 2006 Somali MICS utilized a multi-stage, stratified cluster sampling design to achieve representativeness. The sample was allocated proportionally to different strata, and clusters were selected at multiple stages to account for geographical and demographic variations. The 2011 Somali MICS survey was conducted separately for the two regions: in Somaliland, 4,820 households were surveyed, and 5,865 women were surveyed, where 4,785 households were surveyed, and 5,839 were surveyed in the Northeast Zone. The 2011 Somali MICS adhered to the MICS4 strategy and employed a multi-stage, stratified cluster sampling strategy. The datasets are made publicly available by the Somali National Bureau of Statistics and do not contain any personally identifiable information.

Sample

The study pooled the 2006 and 2011 Somali MICS datasets and included 10,601 ever-married women aged 15-49 years who responded to the primary dependent variable, "Besides yourself, does your

husband have any other wives?" All the study variables were selected from the dataset of women (WM file) of the 2006 and 2011 Somali MICS. Survey weights are important to adjust sample data to ensure representativeness of the target population.²⁵ In addition, in the process of combining various datasets, normalized weights ensure proper contributions from individual datasets, as the weighted sample size is equal to the corresponding actual sample sizes and will not cause overestimation or underestimation in statistical analysis. The weights of the datasets were normalized before they were pooled based on the following approach:

$$\frac{\text{original weight}}{\text{Sum of original weights} / \text{Sample size}}$$

Measurement

The dependent variable of the study was whether or not the women were in polygynous marriages, measured using the question: "Aside from yourself, does your husband have other wives?" with response options "Yes" or "No". A woman would therefore be in a polygynous marriage if her husband had another wife aside from her. The number of co-wives was also asked of women using the question "How many other wives does he have?" Explanatory variables of interest included marital history, coded with the item: "Have you been married only once or more than once?" having answer options "Only once" or "More than once", and age at first marriage (married younger than 18 years or married 18 or older). The justification of domestic violence was also an explanatory variable of interest. The 2006 and 2011 Somali MICS administered a five-item scale of domestic violence and the interviewed women provided their opinion on whether or not the husband is justified in beating his wife for the five reasons "if she goes out without informing him, if she does not take care of the children, if she argues with him, if she does not have sex with him, if she burns food" with the response categories (yes, no, and don't know). A binary variable based on (Yes, No) response categories was created; a woman was regarded as having a tolerant attitude towards domestic violence (coded as Yes), if a woman believed wife-beating to be justified for at least one of the five reasons.



Figure 1: The major cities of Somalia and Somaliland²⁶

She was otherwise put in the category of not justified wife beating for any reason (coded as No). The remaining sociodemographic factors included in the study were woman's age, if ever women attended school, number of children ever born to woman (0-3, 4-6, and 7+), household wealth index (lowest, middle, and highest), husband's age (15-29, 30-49, and 50 or above), type of residence (urban or rural), and region. For analytical purposes, the region variable was recoded into two broad categories: Somaliland, including the regions Waqooyi-Galbeed, Sanaag, Sool, Awdal, and Togdheer, and Somalia, which covers the remaining 13 regions of Somalia's 18 regions. This recoding was conducted in order to enable comparisons between Somaliland and Somalia since Somaliland declared independence in 1991 and is as an independent state, although it is not recognized internationally (See Figure 1).

Analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics (v. 27) was utilized for all statistical analysis, while graphs and graphical presentation were produced using R v. 4.4.2 and

RStudio (version 2024.12.1 Build 563). Missing data was handled using complete case analysis (listwise deletion). Descriptive statistics, graphical plots, and chi-square tests were employed to summarize the prevalence of polygynous marriages among women and the background of the respondents. A binary logistic regression model was run and being in a polygynous marriage (0 = "No", 1 = "Yes") was regressed as a function of marital history, early marriage, and endorsement of domestic violence adjusting for women's age, whether women ever attended school, children ever-born, husband's age, household wealth index, type of residence, and region. To obtain sound standard error estimation and confidence intervals, the sample weight variable was accounted for in the analysis. The Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness-of-fit test was also conducted to evaluate model predictions about observed data, where $p > 0.05$ indicates a good fit, and the final model had 3180 respondents because only those who had complete data on all variables in the model were used in the analysis. Exponentiated coefficients of (adjusted odds ratios) and their 95% confidence intervals

were estimated. Furthermore, crude odds ratios together with a 95% confidence interval for the predictors were reported.

Results

Background

The average age of the women sampled was 30.6 years (SD 7.8), with 42% between 25-34, 35% aged 35-49, and 24% aged 15-24 years. The majority of women, about 72%, had no schooling whatsoever. Socioeconomically, 41% were in the low-income category, 41% in the middle, and 18% in the high-income category. About 53% of the sample were from rural areas. The majority of the respondents were generally from Somalia, 62%, whereas 38% were from Somaliland (See Table 1).

Table 2 shows clear differences between women in monogamous and polygynous marriages. Women in polygynous unions were more likely to have been married before (37% compared with 18%), had slightly larger families, with 26% reporting seven or more children versus 22% among monogamous women, and were also more likely to have married before turning 18 (25% vs. 21%).

Prevalence of women in polygynous unions and the number of co-wives

The percentage of women in polygynous marriages was approximately 20%, and 80% were in monogamous marriages. According to the study, of women in polygynous marriages, 66% had one husband with co wife, 25% had two co-wives, and 9% had three or more co-wives (See Figure 2). Polygynous women reported an average of 1.4 co-wives (SD = 0.70), ranging from 1 to 4.

Results of binary logistic regression

Early marriage (marriage before age 18) was found to increase the likelihood of being in a polygynous marriage, as women who got married at 18 or older had a lower odds ratio (AOR = 0.79 (95% CI: 0.65-0.95, $p = 0.014$). Women who had been married more than once had significantly higher odds of having co-wives than those who married only once (AOR = 1.99 (95% CI: 1.61-2.46, $p < 0.001$). Women whose husbands were aged 30-49 had an adjusted odds ratio of (AOR = 2.86 (95% CI: 1.87-4.36, $p < 0.001$), and those whose husbands were 50

or older had an adjusted odds ratio of (AOR = 4.26 (95% CI: 2.75-6.61, $p < 0.001$). However, justifying domestic violence was not significantly associated with the likelihood of having co-wives (AOR = 0.87 (95% CI: 0.72-1.06, $p = 0.173$).

Women from rural areas had a higher chance of having co-wives (AOR = 1.30 (95% CI: 1.03-1.65, $p = 0.030$) and those from Somaliland had a decreased likelihood of having co-wives (AOR = 0.67 (95% CI: 0.54-0.83, $p < 0.001$) compared to women from Somalia. (Table 3).

Discussion

The study provided empirical evidence on the prevalence and sociodemographic predictors of polygynous marriage among Somali women. It revealed that about 20% of the women in the sample were in a polygynous marriage, which is consistent with previous studies,^{14,17} and underscores the continuation of polygyny in Somali society. Women's age did not show differences in being in a polygynous marriage. Women who were married to older men (30-49 and 50 or above) were more likely to be in polygynous marriages compared to women married to younger men (15-29). This is usually because men go for second wives much later in life, as older men tend to be in a better financial position,¹¹ or the first wife has grown old enough to find it hard to conceive. However, no differences were observed by school attendance or household wealth index. Although lower levels of education are traditionally associated with polygamous marriages,²⁷ education may not be a strong predictor of the form of marriage for Somali women, or looking at levels of educational attainment will provide a more nuanced explanation of the education-polygyny association. Contrary to societies where polygyny is largely practiced by wealthy men,²⁸ polygyny may be practiced across different socioeconomic segments of Somali society.

Compared to women from Somaliland, women from Somalia were more likely to be in polygynous unions. There is no comparative research on marriage differentials between Somaliland (North) and the remainder of Somalia, although ethnographic research suggests that people in South and Central Somalia marry earlier than people in Somaliland.²⁹

Table 1: Background characteristics (n = 10601)

	n	%
Age distribution (mean = 30.6, SD = 7.8)		
15-24	2496	23.5
25-34	4411	41.6
35-49	3694	34.9
Ever attended School		
Yes	3012	27.7
No	7578	72.3
Wealth index		
Low	4131	40.9
Middle	4412	40.6
High	2058	18.5
Type of residence		
Urban	5223	47.3
Rural	5378	52.7
Region		
Somalia	6671	61.9
Somaliland	3930	38.1

Note: 1. Percentages consider the weighting variable.
 2. Unweighted frequencies were reported. Totals may not sum due to missing cases

Table 2: Comparisons between women in monogamous and polygynous marriages: marital history, fertility, and age at first marriage (n = 10601)

	Monogamous n = 8431 n (%)	Polygynous n = 2170 n (%)	p-value
Marital history			
Married only once	7506 (82.3)	1609 (17.7)	
Married more than once	875 (63.0)	515 (37.0)	< 0.001
Number of children			
0-3	3939 (83.8)	781 (16.2)	< 0.001
4-6	2732 (78.2)	764 (21.8)	
7+	1760 (73.8)	625 (26.2)	
Age at first marriage			
<18	1182 (74.8)	412 (25.2)	0.003
≥18	1412 (79.1)	373 (20.9)	

Note: 1. Analysis considers the weighting variable
 2. Frequencies might not sum up to the total due to missing cases
 3. Unweighted frequencies reported

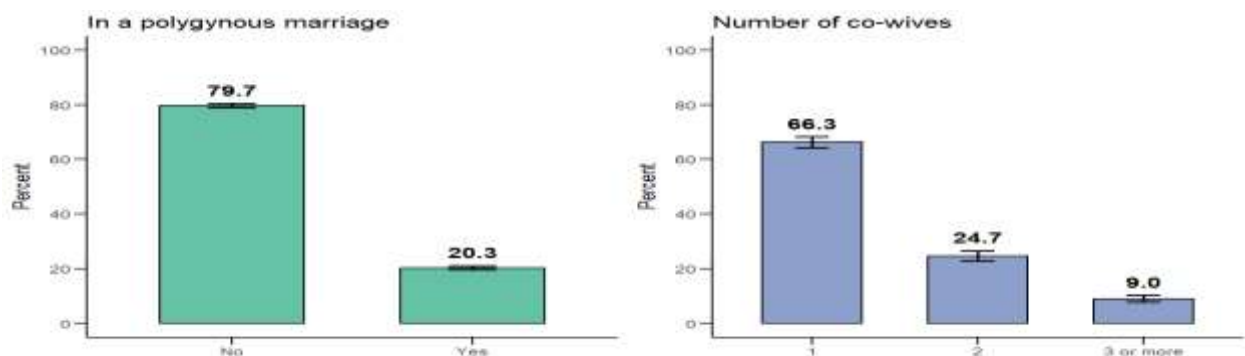


Figure 2: Prevalence of polygyny and number of co-wives (n = 10601)

Table 3: Sociodemographic determinants of having co-wives (n = 3180)

	COR (95% CI)	P-value	AOR (95% CI)	p-value
Age of women				
15-24 (ref)				
25-34	1.80 (1.55-2.08)	0.000	1.20 (0.87-1.65)	0.274
35-49	2.69 (2.33-3.11)	0.000	1.32 (0.93-1.88)	0.122
Ever attended school				
Yes (ref)				
No	1.06 (0.95-1.18)	0.327	1.12 (0.91-1.38)	0.271
Age at first marriage				
<18 (ref)				
≥18	0.78 (0.66-0.93)	0.004	0.79 (0.65-0.95)	0.014
Married more than once				
No (ref)				
Yes	2.73 (2.41-3.09)	0.000	1.99 (1.61-2.46)	0.000
Number of children ever born				
0-3 (ref)				
4-6	1.44 (1.29-1.62)	0.000	0.95 (0.75-1.20)	0.667
7+	1.85 (1.63-2.09)	0.000	1.23 (0.93-1.62)	0.141
Justifies domestic violence				
No (ref)				
Yes	1.07 (0.97-1.19)	0.163	0.87 (0.72-1.06)	0.173
Age of husband				
15-29 (ref)				
30-49	3.70 (2.99-4.59)	0.000	2.86 (1.87-4.36)	0.000
50+	6.82 (5.47-8.49)	0.000	4.26 (2.75-6.61)	0.000
Wealth index				
Low (ref)				
Middle	1.00 (0.89-1.11)	0.930	1.09 (0.88-1.35)	0.429
High	0.97 (0.84-1.11)	0.628	1.30 (0.90-1.86)	0.161
Type of residence				
Urban (ref)				
Rural	1.13 (1.03-1.25)	0.013	1.30 (1.03-1.65)	0.030
Region				
Somalia (ref)				
Somaliland	0.70 (0.63-0.77)	0.000	0.67 (0.54-0.83)	0.000

Note:

AOR = adjusted odds ratio, COR = crude odds ratio, CI = Confidence interval

Adjusted for the age of women, husbands' age, ever-attended school, household wealth index, number of ever-born children, type of residence, and region.

For the adjusted model, the Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness-of-fit test showed that the logistic regression model fits the data well ($\chi^2 = 7.62$, $df = 8$, $p = 0.472$).

As a result of this, South and Central Somali women may have a greater likelihood of being a co-wife. Furthermore, women who lived in rural areas also had a greater chance of being in polygynous unions. This finding corroborates the existing research on polygyny in Sub-Saharan Africa.⁵ Early marriage increases the likelihood of entering a polygynous marriage among Somali women. This supports the current literature that suggests early marriage reduces women's control over partner

choice, making them more susceptible to entering polygynous marriages.²⁴ Additionally, women's marital history plays a role in polygyny, as Somali women who had been married more than once had almost twice the odds of having co-wives. This supports the reality that previously married women would have little opportunity for monogamous remarriage, for which polygyny is the option for divorced or widowed women. For example, after divorce, even though women are more independent

in choosing their new husbands, Somali women return to their parents, and to lessen the economic burden on parents and siblings, they may end up being married in polygynous marriages. Although recent research shows a positive association between the justification of domestic violence against women and polygyny³⁰, the study did not find an association between the justification of domestic violence and being in polygynous marriages among sampled women. This may be that polygyny is normalized in the Somali culture while domestic violence is more contested; therefore, women who refuse domestic violence may enter into a polygynous marriage.

As early marriage heightens the likelihood of entering polygynous marriages, the government and other organizations concerned with awareness campaigns for the delay of marriage age can enhance women's agency in spouse selection. Additionally, the observation that polygyny is more prevalent among women with previous marriages signifies the need for social protection initiatives for divorced and widowed women in Somali society. Though schooling was not found to differ significantly with polygyny, further studies on the number of years of schooling may reveal more.

Limitations

Although the study utilized datasets of probability samples with large samples, the prevalence reported may not reflect the current or future prevalence of Somali women in polygynous marriages, but could be useful for future research studies. Furthermore, the analysis did not include other important factors that would provide a wider comprehension of Somali women's likelihood of being in a polygynous marriage, such as women's employment status.

Conclusion

The research contributes to the study of polygyny among Somali women by analyzing prevalence and socio-demographic predictors. The findings highlight the influence of early marriage, marital history, urban or rural residence, and age of husband on the probability of being in a polygynous union. The implications highlight the need for program efforts that aim to empower women

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through education, economic assistance, and social support. Future research must examine the lived experience of Somali women in polygynous marriage and the associated psychological, economic, and social impacts.

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Ethical statement

Ethical approval was not required for this research, as the datasets used are publicly available and don't include personally identifiable information.

Data availability

The datasets used in this study are publicly available at:
<https://microdata.nbs.gov.so/index.php/catalog/?page=1&ps=15>

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Authors contribution

Abdirahman Saeed Mohamed: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, writing original draft, writing review & editing.

Mustafa Hassan Dahir: methodology, comments, revision & editing.

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