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Article

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THE EFFECTS OF POLYGYNY FAMILY CONFLICT ON FAMILY COHESION IN MORO LGA OF KWARA STATE OF NIGERIA

Rasheedat Damilola Alanamu ¹, Abdulazeez Alao Adekola ², Yusuf Olatunji Onimago ³ & Abdulraful Olayinka Balogun ⁴

Centre for Peace and Security Studies, Al-Hikmah University, Ilorin, Nigeria ^{1, 2 & 3}

Sociology Department, Al-Hikmah University, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria ⁴

Corresponding Email: alanamurasheedatdamilola@gmail.com ¹

Abstract

In many parts of the world, family stability is increasingly threatened by destructive conflict, particularly in polygynous households. This study examines the effects of polygynous family conflict on family cohesion among residents of Moro Local Government Area (LGA), Kwara State, Nigeria. The specific objectives were to identify the causes of conflict in polygynous families, assess its effects on family cohesion, and explore the challenges of managing such conflicts. A descriptive research design was adopted, using a quantitative method of data collection. Purposive sampling technique was employed to select (30) polygynous families from *Molete, Jebba, Bode-Saadu, Lanwa, and Ipaye* towns/communities in Moro LGA. A total of 123 family members including husbands, wives, children, community and religious leaders were selected and 120 valid responses was retrieved and analysed using descriptive statistics. Findings revealed that the main causes of conflict included preferential treatment by husbands toward one wife and her children, inability to meet financial obligations across households, and perceived emotional neglect. These conflicts resulted in communication break-down, reduced family stability, and poor parental coordination in child up-bringing. Major challenges to conflict management included inadequate communication, cultural and religious constraints, poor decision-making by husbands, and weak social support systems. The study concludes that conflict in polygynous families undermines family cohesion, marital harmony, and child wellbeing. It recommended that husbands, as central figures in polygynous households, be sensitised through religious and traditional institutions on equitable leadership, emotional intelligence, and fair resource distribution.

Keywords: Polygyny, Family Conflict, Family Cohesion, Marital Stability, Kwara State.

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Introduction

Family is an important unit of any society since time immemorial (Adeyemi, 2021). It is not just coming together of husband and wife, but an avenue for cultural, biological, mental and physical development, and preservation of an individual's right from the point of birth to death. Every union begins with a connection between a man and a woman, a bond that grows and eventually leads to marriage (Mukherjee & Khan, 2019). For some, this partnership remains between just two people; for others, it expands to include more wives, forming what is known as a polygyny family (Omar & Suleiman, 2020). In such settings, a man may share his home and life with two, three, or even four wives, each with her own story and place within the household (Ncube, 2018). Across every societies, both monogamy and polygyny shape the foundation of family cohesion, each carrying its own meanings, challenges, and rhythms of human connection. In some societies of the world such as Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, a man marries more than one wife, a practice known as polygyny. This arrangement, though deeply rooted in tradition and religion culture, often creates a complex web of relationships shaped by love, jealousy, power, and survival (Altman & Ginat, 2019). Beneath its communal acceptance lies a quiet tension of emotional strain between co-wives, unequal attention from husbands, and competition for resources (Madhavan & Gross, 2013). To this end, conflict in polygynous unions remains inevitable.

In Nigeria, for instance, studies (Oluwole & Olatunji, 2022; Onditi, 2021) revealed that rivalries among co-wives can lead to persistent domestic disputes and emotional neglect. In Kenya and Tanzania, conflicts often revolve around inheritance, favoritism, and the distribution of economic benefits. Meanwhile, in Middle Eastern contexts such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia, women in polygynous marriages report feelings of insecurity, loneliness, and reduced marital satisfaction (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2006). Even in regions where the practice is legally permitted, such as parts of Indonesia, debates continue about its psychological and social costs (Rahman & Abdullah, 2017). In Kwara State Nigeria, where Islamic and traditional values intertwine, polygyny is legitimised by religion but challenged by the realities of modern life. Many women report emotional distress stemming from rivalry, favoritism, and financial strain, especially when husbands fail to provide equally for all households (Abdullahi & Saka, 2023). Children growing up in such homes may experience divided attention, leading to feelings of insecurity or resentment. Community elders often step in to mediate disputes, but many conflicts remain unresolved, simmering beneath the surface of family life (Adamu, 2019).

Traditionally, extended or/and polygyny family system fosters interdependence, collective responsibility, and emotional support, which reinforce cohesion (Adegoke, 2010). However, in today's fast-changing world, the structure and stability of families are increasingly tested by destructive conflict that often erupts in family with multiple wives. These factors often weaken traditional family ties and increase the risk of emotional distance among members (Walsh, 2016). For instance, financial strain or parental conflict can create divisions that reduce communication and shared responsibility, eroding the sense of unity that defines cohesive families (Cummings & Davies, 2010). Studies (Taylor & Conger, 2017; Richters & Pollack, 2019; García-Huidobro et al., 2018) have shown that high family cohesion promotes resilience, academic success and psychological well-being among children and adolescents. Conversely, families with weak cohesion tend to experience higher levels of stress, behavioral issues, and emotional instability (Shek, 2002). Understanding effects of conflict on family cohesion among polygyny families in Moro LGA of Kwara State is therefore not just an academic exercise but a societal need.

Statement of the Problem

Polygyny remains a deeply rooted marital practice in many parts of Kwara State, especially in many rural communities of Moro Local Government Area (LGA). While it is often justified on cultural, religious, and economic grounds, the practice increasingly generates tension within families. These conflicts not only affect the emotional stability of spouses but also spill over to children, who may experience divided loyalties and insecurity within the family system (Odu & Adejumo, 2014). Available records obtained from family social welfare office, traditional and religious leaders in the Moro LGA shows that many families struggle with these hidden tensions especially, among residents of rural communities. Despite these realities, little empirical research has explored how such conflicts specifically affect family cohesion, the emotional glue that holds family members together in this part of Kwara State. Several studies (Muritala et al., 2024; Shittu & Olorun-Oje, 2019; Lasisi & Shuaib, 2024; Razak et al., 2021) have been carried out on polygyny family conflict in Kwara State and beyond. Some of these studies such as Shittu and Olorun-Oje (2019); Razak (2021) focused on the effects on polygyny family conflict on children. Some (Muritala et al., 2024; Lasisi & Shuaib, 2024) have even uncovered the effectiveness of managing polygyny family conflict. In spite of these laudable studies and several other ones, there is a dearth of knowledge on the effects of polygyny family conflict on family cohesion among residents of Moro LGA of Kwara State Nigeria. This study, therefore, seeks to fill this gap. The aim of this study is to investigate the effects of polygyny family conflict on family cohesion among residents of Moro LGA of Kwara State Nigeria, the specific objectives are to: assess the effects of polygyny family conflict on family cohesion; and explore challenges of managing polygyny family conflict in Moro LGA of Kwara State Nigeria.

Literature Review

Conceptual Discourse

Family: Family has become an important unit or institution in any given society. A family is a group of individuals connected by marriage, biological ties, or adoption, constituting a cohesive social unit where members fulfill roles such as spouses, parents, children, and siblings (Open Oregon Educational Resources, 2023). It differs from a household, which may include unrelated occupants like boarders or tenants sharing the same dwelling (Seneca Learning, 2024). Although the term “family” is sometimes used interchangeably with a married couple, its core essence lies in the parent-child bond, which may be absent in some marital pairings. At the simplest level, a family may consist of a single adult and their child or children (Owolabi, 2023). More commonly, it refers to two married adults typically from different lineages living with their offspring in a private residence, embodying the nuclear family, which sociologists consider one of the earliest and most universal family structures (Amah & Ogah, 2021). Families can be classified in different ways depending on their structure, values, and societal changes (Adeyemi & Ogunleye, 2021). The nuclear family, made up of a father, mother, and children, remains the primary unit responsible for child socialisation and cultural transmission (Fagbemi, 2023). Extended families, which include relatives such as grandparents, in-laws, and siblings, are also common in many societies (Hassan & Edem, 2020). However, in the philosophy of family formation, polygyny is collective, patriarchal, and traditional, while single-parent, childless, and gay/lesbian families are often individualised, modern, and shaped by choice or circumstance. The family roles, authority structures, and even emotional dynamics are significantly different. This study

therefore will be focusing a polygyny family type where a husband marries more than one wife.

Polygyny

Polygyny is a form of marriage in which a person has more than one spouse at the same time. It is often discussed as the other side of monogamy; a relationship in which a person has only one spouse at a given time. In instances where a woman has more than one husband, although generally rare, it is referred to as polyandry. According to Elbedour et al. (2002), polygyny represents expanded family structures that are based on marriages involving a husband with two or more wives. Shaiful et al. (2021) further states that polygyny is defined as a marital system in which one man is married concurrently to more than one woman. It could be deduced from the definitions that polygyny involves multiple wives married to one man. It must however be noted that it is difficult to obtain statistics on the prevalence of polygyny. However, it is a system of marriage proudly embrace in Asian and Africa continents.

Polygyny Family Conflict

Conflict in polygyny family remains inevitable due to relationship that exists among different actors that exist there. According to Aye et al. (2016), polygamous family conflict is any conflict that occurs within a family between husband and wives, parents and children, between siblings or with extended families grandparents, aunts and uncle. At first instance, Adediran et al. (2021) argued that without any actor's supremacy or influence over the other, flawless marriage is all about tolerance, forgiveness and love. However, it is impossible to realised perfect marriage due to individual differences of actors' involved (McNulty et al., 2021). Nevertheless, coming together of husband and wife is an oath that predicaments people to the human race. It has its roots in togetherness and love. Additionally, relationships inside polygamous marriages enhance the family and help children feel united and one. However, in certain polygamous marriages, this is not the case. According to Martinez (2024), multiples wives have particularly compelling interests regarding their economic and legal status at death and divorce. Some of these interests include intestacy rights and parenting rights, testifying immunity, recourse for domestic violence, and need for community. Essien (2018) argued that polygamy is not exclusively advantageous as it can lead to some level of unhappiness, loneliness, and lack of intimacy for the women involved in it. Also, insalubrious characters such as co-wife suspiciousness, rivalry, unhealthy competition, and unfair distribution of emotional and household resources can arise in polygamy. It has been verified that this uncooperativeness increases hostility amongst co-wives and their kids (Pillay, 2023). This is so because in polygamous marriage relationship, most young women displays anxiety, anger, despair, and a sense of loss when a new co-wife arrives because they are scared of losing some or all of the possessions that would otherwise be theirs.

Family Cohesion

Family cohesion refers to the emotional glue between family members the sense of connection, belonging, and mutual support that we feel in our closest relationships. It is about how much individuals within a household lean on each other for emotional, social and practical support. According to Lee and Han (2024), this kind of cohesion sits at the heart of what makes a family strong, intertwined with their ability to cope and to engage with each other meaningfully supported by good communication, shared values and goals, and access

to key resources. When cohesion is high, children and adolescents benefit. They often do better academically, experience fewer internalising difficulties (like anxiety or depression) and fewer externalising issues (such as delinquency or behavioural problems), and families navigating illness, loss or chronic stress tend to report higher quality of life (Foster et al., 2014; Birgisdóttir, 2023). Moreover, families with strong cohesion are better at weathering crises, they show greater resilience and wellbeing, suppress stress before it turns into dysfunction (Herman-Stahl et al., 2008). On the flip side, low cohesion often manifests as weak emotional bonds, limited support, and higher risk of family fragmentation, depression, and lack of emotional safety.

Theoretical Frame Work

This study is anchored on Family Systems Theory, which views the family as an emotional unit where each person's behaviour affects others. Developed by psychiatrist Murray Bowen in the late 1940s and early 1950s and first published in 1966, the theory departs from earlier individual-focused models by conceptualising the family as an interconnected system. Within this system, individuals are shaped and regulated by the collective emotional environment rather than functioning as entirely autonomous entities (Bowen, 1978). Bowen's theory explains how family bonds influence members' thoughts, emotions, and actions, showing that each person's well-being and behaviour are linked to the broader family dynamic (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). A major strength of the theory lies in its holistic perspective. It recognizes that family dynamics whether in monogamous or polygynous settings operate through emotional interdependence, making it adaptable across cultures (Papero, 1990; Titelman, 2014). Critics argue that it may underplay the role of individual agency, social structures, and cultural or economic influences that shape family relationships (Nichols, 2013). In the context of this study, the theory provides a lens for understanding how interactions within polygynous families influence emotional balance, communication, and stability. The theory assumes that the family functions as an interdependent emotional unit where the behaviour of one member affects others (Bowen, 1978). In polygynous households, where multiple wives and children coexist, this interdependence often becomes complex and tension between co-wives or between parents and children can easily disrupt the emotional climate of the entire family system. Therefore the theory interprets polygyny family conflict not as an isolated occurrence but as a systemic reaction that affects family cohesion. For instance, emotional triangles where one person draws a third party into a conflict are common in polygynous settings, leading to alliances and divisions that weaken unity (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Also, it offers a framework for analysing how polygyny-related tensions such as competition for attention, resources, and recognition affect emotional bonds, stability, and collective functioning in families in Moro LGA. In practical terms, Family Systems Theory supports interventions aimed at strengthening family cohesion by promoting better communication, emotional differentiation, and understanding of relational patterns.

Methodology

Research Design: This study employed a descriptive survey design to examine the relationship between family conflict and family cohesion among polygynous families in Moro Local Government Area (LGA), Kwara State. Data were collected using structured questionnaires administered to husbands, wives, children in polygynous households, and key eyewitnesses to capture respondents' perceptions and experiences. The study population comprised 163,200 residents of Moro LGA (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Using

purposive sampling, 30 polygynous families were selected from five randomly chosen communities Molete, Jebba, Bode-Sadua, Lanwa, and Ipaye yielding a total of 123 respondents, including husbands, wives, children, and relevant stakeholders such as family welfare officials, community and religious leaders, and marital conflict mediators. Out of the 123 copies of the questionnaire distributed, 120 were retrieved and analysed. Primary data were supplemented with secondary sources from academic literature and official records. Data analysis employed descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. Ethical standards were observed through informed consent, confidentiality, and assurances that data were used solely for research purposes.

Data Presentations, Analysis, and Discussion of the Findings

Table 1: Demographic Data of Sampled Respondents in Ilorin Metropolis N=120

Demographic information	Frequency 120	Percent%
Gender		
Male	52	43.0
Female	68	57.0
Age Group		
18 - 25	11	9.0
26 - 35	46	39.0
36 - 45	34	28.0
46 and above	29	24.0
Marital status		
Divorcee	37	30.83
Married	83	69.17
Number of Children		
1 – 2 children	27	22.5
3 and above	93	77.5%
Level of Education		
Primary Education	21	18.0%
Secondary Education	38	32.0%
Tertiary Education	45	38.0%
Non-formal Education	16	12.0%
Occupation		
Trading/Artisan	42	35.0%
Professionals/Civil Servant	40	33.0%
Truck/Taxi/Keke Drivers	16	14.0%
Unemployed	22	18.0%

Source: Research's Field Survey, 2025

Table 1 summarises the socio-demographic characteristics of the 120 respondents. Females constituted a higher proportion (57%) than males (43%), reflecting the heightened exposure of women particularly co-wives to conflict in polygynous households. Most respondents were in their late twenties to mid-forties, an age associated with increased family and economic responsibilities. About 69% were married, while nearly one-third were divorced, suggesting that polygyny may exert strain on marital stability. A large majority (77.5%) had three or more children, consistent with the extended family structure of polygynous households, where competition for resources and attention may intensify conflict. Most respondents had at least secondary education, indicating awareness of family dynamics within prevailing cultural norms. Occupational diversity, including trading, artisan work, civil service, and driving, reflects varying economic conditions that may shape family interactions.

Overall, the data depict the everyday realities of polygynous families in Moro LGA, characterised by large households navigating economic, cultural, and relational pressures.

The Effects of Polygyny Family Conflict on Family Cohesion in Moro LGA of Kwara State

Table 2: Mean Ratings on the Effects of Polygyny Family Conflict on Family Cohesion in Moro LGA of Kwara State

S/N	the effects of polygyny family conflict on family cohesion:	Mean	Std. Deviation	Decision	Rank
1	communication gap between partners	4.30	1.04	Accepted	1 th
2	Reduced family stability	4.29	1.00	Accepted	2 st
3	Poor parental up-bringing of the couple's children	3.91	0.86	Accepted	3 rd
4	Absent of family loyalty and commitment	4.16	0.95	Accepted	4 th
5	decrease in the sanctity of marriage institution	4.07	0.92	Accepted	5 nd
GRAND MEAN		4.06	0.89		

Source: Researcher's Field Survey, 2024; **Key:** Mean > 3.00, accepted; Mean < 3.00, rejected.

The findings demonstrate that conflict within polygynous families significantly weakens family cohesion in Moro LGA, Kwara State. Communication gaps between partners ranked highest (mean = 4.30), indicating that poor dialogue and emotional withdrawal undermine trust and connectedness. This supports Balogun et al. (2021), who linked ineffective spousal communication to marital dissatisfaction and conflict. Reduced family stability (mean = 4.29) shows that conflict extends beyond spouses to destabilise the wider household, particularly affecting children. This aligns with Renner and Krieger (2022), who associated polygyny with structural instability driven by gender hierarchies. Similarly, poor parental upbringing (mean = 3.91) reflects how persistent tension diminishes parents' capacity for consistent guidance, reinforcing findings by Kakar and Sultan (2025) on children's insecurity and emotional detachment in polygynous families. The absence of family loyalty and commitment (mean = 4.16) suggests a shift from collective responsibility to individual competition, corroborating Adebowale and Palamuleni (2015), who linked polygyny to reduced spousal cooperation. Respondents also agreed that conflict erodes the sanctity of marriage (mean = 4.07), highlighting broader social consequences as conflict-driven relationships weaken the moral foundation of the marital institution.

The Challenges of Managing Polygyny Family Conflict in Moro LGA of Kwara State Nigeria

Table 3: Mean Ratings Challenges Managing polygyny Family Conflict in Moro LGA of Kwara State Nigeria in Moro LGA of Kwara State

S/N	challenges managing polygyny family conflict:	Mean	Std. Deviation	Decision	Rank
1	Inadequate of open communication	4.30	1.04	Accepted	1 th
2	Cultural and religious constraints	4.29	1.00	Accepted	2 st
3	Poor decision-making by the husband	4.18	0.97	Accepted	3 nd
4	Children's involvement in conflict	3.91	0.86	Accepted	6 rd
5	Absence of community family counselling	4.16	0.95	Accepted	4 th
6	Unending mistrust among co-wives	4.07	0.92	Accepted	5 nd
GRAND MEAN		4.06	0.89		

Source: Researcher's Field Survey, 2024; **Key:** Mean > 3.00, accepted; Mean < 3.00, rejected.

The findings indicate that conflict management in polygynous families in Moro LGA is constrained by communication, cultural, and structural challenges. Inadequate open communication ranked highest (mean = 4.30), suggesting that partners often suppress grievances, allowing minor disputes to escalate into persistent resentment. This supports Adebayo and Adetunji (2019), who identified open communication as a key predictor of marital stability, while poor communication fosters emotional withdrawal. In polygynous settings, limited interaction between husbands and wives both collectively and individually widens communication gaps and intensifies conflict.

Cultural and religious constraints (mean = 4.29) further complicate conflict management by discouraging dialogue and reinforcing rigid gender roles. As noted by Balogun and Yakubu (2021), such norms often silence women's voices, promoting endurance rather than resolution of conflict. Consequently, many wives experience unresolved tension and emotional dissatisfaction despite outward compliance. Poor decision-making by husbands (mean = 4.18) emerged as another major challenge. As household heads, husbands' inability to equitably manage emotional and material resources deepens rivalry among co-wives, corroborating Adebawale and Palamuleni (2015). The absence of community-based family counselling (mean = 4.16) also limits access to neutral mediation, leaving families to manage conflicts without guidance. Previous studies (Esere, 2008; Akinlabi & Bello, 2020) emphasise the role of counselling in promoting constructive conflict resolution. Relatedly, persistent mistrust among co-wives (mean = 4.07) weakens family unity, while children's involvement in conflict (mean = 3.91) exposes them to emotional and social risks, consistent with Cummings and Davies (2010). Overall, the grand mean of 4.06 underscores that conflict management challenges in polygynous families are both emotional and structural. Without open communication, equitable leadership, and community support, conflicts are likely to persist and undermine family cohesion.

Conclusion

Conflict remains an inevitable occurrence in polygynous family settings across the communities and towns of Moro LGA in Kwara State. The roots of these conflicts extend beyond mere personality clashes; they stem from competing needs for fairness, security, and recognition. When emotional and material balance weakens, family peace becomes fragile. This imbalance not only fragments emotional bonds but also undermines the stability, shared values, and child-nurturing roles that sustain family cohesion. Moreover, the persistent absence of honest dialogue, equitable, poor leadership from polygynous husbands, and inadequate social support through marriage except continues to hinder the peaceful management of family conflict. Against this backdrop, the study concludes that conflict in polygynous families poses serious negative implications for family cohesion in Moro LGA, threatening both marital harmony and the well-being of children.

Recommendations

- i. Local government and social welfare agencies should integrate family-life education into community development programmes and ensure that polygynous families have access to psychological and legal support during conflict. In this regard, the State Ministry of Social Development should expand family welfare offices to better reach grassroots communities.
- ii. Cultural norms that silence women in conflict should be addressed through sensitisation programmes. Encouraging women's participation in family and community decision-making will fosters fairness and mutual respect.

- iii. Polygynous husbands should receive orientation through religious and traditional institutions on equitable leadership, emotional intelligence, and fair resource distribution to strengthen decision-making, reduce rivalry, and build trust within polygynous families.

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