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# POLYGAMY: A Historical Background

A Fact Sheet Prepared for the  
Council on Contemporary Families

Stephanie Coontz  
Director of Research  
and Public Education  
Council On Contemporary Families

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## Polygamy: A Historical Background

Stephanie Coontz  
Professor of History and Family Studies  
The Evergreen State College  
Director of Research and Public Education  
Council on Contemporary Families

The new HBO television show, "Big Love," has led many people to contact the Council on Contemporary Families for background on polygamy. Historian Stephanie Coontz, Director of Research and Public Education at the Council, has put together the following background information:

### **Background on Polygamy**

Polygamy means multiple spouses. The most common form is polygyny, where a man can have many wives. Less common, but found in some societies such as Tibet, is polyandry, where a woman can have many husbands. Polygyny was accepted or even preferred in three/fourths of preindustrial traditional societies, though it was seldom practiced by the commoners or lower classes. It tended to occur most frequently in societies where the route to winning wealth and political power was through attracting followers or having lots of sons to hunt for the family head or defend the family's land. So a man might marry several wives and have them produce textiles he could trade, or grow food for elaborate feasts he could use to put poorer members of the community in his debt.

In other cases, wealthy men accumulated many wives to produce more sons. It was very common for kings and other royalty to have many wives, both as a way to make alliances with other states or noble families and to ensure that they would have plenty of heirs. The king of the Merina in the highlands of Madagascar had twelve wives, each with a palace in a different part of his country. He stayed with whichever one was nearest when he traveled through the kingdom, thus avoiding the juggling problems that are fictionally portrayed in the HBO series, "Big Love."

It takes a certain amount of wealth to support more than one wife, but in many pre-industrial societies, having several wives increased a man's wealth and political power rather than being a drain on his resources. Polygyny is not usually associated with a high status for women, and in many cultures it involved very young women being forced to marry older men. Still, in a society where gender roles are very rigid and women do most of the work around the farm and household, some women like having a co-wife. In Botswana, women have an interesting twist on the old saying "a woman's work is never done." They say "without co-wives, a woman's work is never done." Such women claim that having other wives to help meet some of their husband's demands

and to share the child-rearing gives them more freedom than women in monogamous unions.

An example of this from America can be found among the Plains Indians. The traditional division of labor between men and women, where men hunted and women tanned the hides, was pretty evenly divided in the old days. But when the men acquired guns and horses from the Europeans and started to kill more buffalo for the fur trade, the most successful and richest hunters began to marry more wives. The age of marriage fell, and restrictions on women's independence became harsher. Yet some women actually welcomed the extra help when their husband took more wives. A researcher who worked with the Cheyenne Indians in the 1930s and 1940s told the story of a chief who wanted to get rid of two of his three wives. The wives joined ranks and said that if he sent two away, he would have to send the third as well.

Polygyny is not so much about sex as it is about hoarding the productive and reproductive labor of women. It has often been used to deny younger men access to wives and hence to adult status, increasing the authority of older men over younger ones. There are easier ways for a man to get sex, if that's all he wants, and cheaper ones too, in societies where women's labor is not essential to family subsistence.

Polygamous societies are often ones where both men and women are more emotionally invested in their relations with siblings and parents than in their marriage relations. The main tensions among wives in polygynous societies are not usually about sex, but about the distribution of resources among the wives and to their children. In many ancient kingdoms, these tensions often led to one wife plotting to kill the children of another. Polygamy of either sort is far less common than it used to be, and is now concentrated in Africa, the Middle East, India, Thailand, and Indonesia.

The trend over the past century has been toward limiting polygamy. Some societies have introduced a gradual reduction in the number of wives permitted, while others have relegated the status of secondary wives to that of concubines, and some have outlawed it outright. The Mormons are an exceptional case of polygyny being adopted in an industrializing society. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints began in 1830 with a revelation about the role of Jesus in the New World. Early Mormons condemned much of nineteenth century Christianity as a corruption of the true church, and sought to return to a purer faith, one which harkened back to God's ancient law. Among other important innovations, Smith's 1843 Revelation on Celestial Marriage reinstated polygyny, and referred to the law of the family followed by Biblical patriarchs. Patriarchal marriage, as it was often called, was believed to elevate the family in this world and the next, and those involved in polygyny had access to higher levels of salvation. They were also the leaders of the church in this world.

Smith never lived openly with his plural wives, but when the Mormons migrated to Utah after Smith's martyrdom, polygyny was more openly practiced. Brigham Young

had more than 50 wives. Nineteen of them were connubial wives, and they bore him 56 children.

However, the U.S. government moved to penalize Mormons through a series of federal statutes that outlawed polygamy and limited the power of the Mormon Church to acquire property (1862); provided that non-Mormons could serve on juries (1874); punished the practice of living with more than one wife (1882); and forfeited Church property (1887). The Supreme Court upheld these statutes, despite Mormon claims to a right to practice their faith without outside interference. In 1890, the church president issued a Manifesto forgoing plural marriage. Some Mormons persisted in the practice and a relatively small number of new polygamous marriages were celebrated after the Manifesto, but since 1904 the Church has had a policy of excommunicating followers who practice it.

Groups of disaffected former Mormons, who have generally refused to accept the Manifesto, have formed polygamous communities or enclaves. Some communities are isolated in rural locations, while others exist in more settled and populous areas. These groups have stimulated much public discussion and debate. Advocacy groups such as Tapestry Against Polygamy, composed of former plural wives, are countered by defenders of polygamy such as the women who wrote *Harmony of Polygamy*.

For more cross-cultural examples of multiple marriage or stories about the intrigues and violence accompanying historical polygamy, see Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, A History: How Love Conquered Marriage*. Coontz teaches history and family studies at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington.

For an analysis of the claims of Mormons and their opponents about what polygamy meant in American politics, society and law in the nineteenth century, see Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in 19th Century America*. Gordon is Professor of Law & History at the University of Pennsylvania.

For more on the development of marriage law and public policy, see Nancy Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation*. Cott is Professor of History at Harvard University.

## About the Author

Stephanie Coontz

Professor of History and Family Studies

The Evergreen State College

Director of Research and Public Education

Council on Contemporary Families

Email: [coontz@msn.com](mailto:coontz@msn.com)

Phone: 360-352-8117

## About CCF

The Council on Contemporary Families is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to providing the press and public with the latest research and best-practice findings about American families. Our members include demographers, economists, family therapists, historians, political scientists, psychologists, social workers, sociologists, as well as other family social scientists and practitioners.

Founded in 1996 and now based in the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Miami, the Council's mission is to enhance the national understanding of how and why contemporary families are changing, what needs and challenges they face, and how these needs can best be met. To fulfill that mission, the Council holds annual conferences, open to the public, and issues periodic briefing papers and fact sheets.

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