

Polygyny and Intimate Partner Violence: Comparing Family Structures in India

L. Allen Furr*

Emeritus Professor of Sociology, Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama, USA

*Corresponding Author Email: allen.furr@auburn.edu

Abstract: *Polygyny has been deemed a “harmful cultural practice” because of its injurious effects on women, including violence. Most research on this topic has been conducted in Africa where polygyny is relatively common. However, 1.4 percent of marriages in India are polygynous, and because polygyny is not considered a normative Indian custom, little research on violence in these marriages has been conducted. The present study explored the association between polygyny and violence in India and found that women in polygynous marriages are just over two times more likely to experience IPV than other women. In addition, IPV occurs in polygynous marriages independently of other factors associated with gendered violence in relationships. The study concludes that polygyny itself presents as a cause of violence. Conceptualizing polygyny solely as an element of culture limits our ability to see the power differentials inherent in polygyny and to observe the means in which this marital form contributes to gender inequality.*

Keywords: India, Polygyny, Intimate Partner Violence

INTRODUCTION

A number of socio-cultural practices have been deemed detrimental to women’s well-being. Known as “cultural harmful practices”, these customs and traditions adversely affect the physical, sexual, and psychological health of women, violates their human rights, and limits women’s access to socio-economic activities (Abede et al. 2021). For example, cultural norms such as genital mutilation, child marriage, and denial of proper nutrition during the antenatal period are believed to be cultural traditions or consequences of cultural norms that demean, subjugate, or compromise the health and well-being of girls and women (United Nations 2026; Abebe et al. 2021). Although normative where they occur, these practices have tangible outcomes that relegate women to lower social status positions and poorer health in relation to men.

Another such practice is polygyny, a marital form in which men have multiple wives. More common among impoverished societies and villages in sub-Saharan Africa, polygyny is generally regarded as injurious to women in terms of insufficient nutrition, reduced access to health care, and diminished psychological health (McDermott 2018). In some contexts, however, the practice has been found to benefit women’s well-being (Lawson et al. 2015). Under certain conditions, Lawson’s group found that polygyny improved women’s well-being and that harm to women could be explained by factors such as ecological vulnerability and access to education. Nevertheless, polygyny is largely associated with negative outcomes for women, and vulnerability to violence is commonly found in research on polygyny.

Studies of sub-Saharan cultures have consistently found polygyny’s association with intimate partner violence (IPV) (Aboagye et al. 2025; Ahinkorah 2021). Researchers have posited several theories to account for the higher risk of IPV in polygynous marriages. Ahinkorah’s (2021) literature review identified factors such as more competition among wives for resources that contributes to conflicted relationships in the household, poor communication and information sharing, and weaker emotional ties within the family as contributing to violence.

The present study posits that these conditions are consequences of the polygynous marital form. It is argued here that men use violence to provide order and resolve these relational outcomes, which are set within the context

of patriarchal norms and values. The discord upsets men's sense of entitlement to women's services, and violence becomes a means to control their wives. Therefore, it is expected that IPV will be more prevalent in polygynous marriages regardless of other social factors. One exception may be education. Women who have less education achievement, making them less self-reliant and thus dependent, may be more at risk of violence because they likely have fewer life choices and must submit to this marital type for survival.

While numerous studies have shown that polygyny is associated with IPV and have identified conditions in which that violence occurs, no study to date has sought to control for those conditions to determine if polygyny acts independently as a risk factor.

Polygyny in India. The large majority of studies on violence and polygyny have been conducted in Africa. Perhaps because polygyny is uncommon in India, little research has been conducted in comparison to Africa; however, polygyny accounts for about 1.4 percent of all marriages in the country. Though polygyny is found among several religious groups, it is most common among Muslims primarily because polygyny is legal for members of that religion (Kumari and Ram 2025).

The research on polygyny and IPV in India has found a relationship between IPV and polygyny (Rahaman et al. 2022). The present study builds on this finding by (a) calculating the actual risk probability of IPV within polygynous marriages and (b) controlling for other socio-economic and cultural factors. To advance our knowledge of the impact of this marital structure on IPV, the hypothesis here is that women in polygynous marriages will be more likely to experience IPV than women in other marital types when other factors are controlled. The intent of testing this hypothesis is to eliminate alternative explanations of the relationship between polygyny and IPV and thus confirm that polygyny is a structural factor that increases IPV probability.

METHODOLOGY

Data. The data for this study were taken from the 2021 wave of the Demographic and Health Survey for India known as the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) (International Institute for Population Sciences 2021) and were collected under the supervision of the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS). The NFHS is an on-going repeated cross-sectional project and is subjected to rigorous protections of human research participants. Protocols were reviewed and approved by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare of the Government of India, the institutional review boards of IIPS and ICF (the consulting firm that designs the NFHS studies), and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (IIPS 2021b). The data were used by permission from Measure-DHS, the American sponsor of the data.

Because of the small polygynous group, a random subsample of two percent of the non-polygynous women was drawn to roughly match the sample size of polygynous

women. Responses from 2,177 women, therefore, were examined.

Variables. The dependent variable in this study is IPV. The NFHS asks respondents if they have been subjected to a range of violent assaults by their husbands. These assaults, ranging from slapping to attacks with weapons, were tallied and then dichotomized. If a respondent had ever been assaulted in any way, they were coded 1, and if not, 0.

Several independent variables were used in the analysis. Polygyny was coded as present (1) or not present (0). Caste was indicated as combining SC, OBC, and tribal as 1 and others 0. Education was measured as five ordinal levels of achievement (1=no education, 5=post-graduate), and wealth was measured in quintiles where 5 represented the wealthiest respondents and 1 the lowest. For residence, urban was coded as 1 and rural as 0, and because polygyny is legal for Muslims in India, Islam is the modal group for religion.

To test the hypothesis, a two-step analytical plan was followed. First, to test the relationship between polygyny and IPV, a simple cross tabulation procedure was run to insure a statistical relationship among polygyny and violence. Once a statistical connection was assured, a hierarchical binary regression analysis ensued to introduce controls and test the predictive value of polygyny in explaining violence. The regression included two equations. First, only polygyny was observed as an independent variable. In the second model, indicators of social status and social capital were introduced as controls.

RESULTS

This study sought to test the hypothesis that women in India who were in polygynous marriages were more at risk for violence from their husbands than women not in such relationships. The results of the descriptive crosstabulation (Table 1) show that there is indeed a positive relationship between marital structure and IPV. Over 42 percent of women in polygynous marriages reported having experienced violence by their husbands, compared to 26.6

TABLE 1. Descriptive Analysis of the Relationship between Polygyny and IPV

		Polygyny	
		No	Yes
Violence	No	854	588
		73.40%	58.00%
	Yes	309	426
		26.60%	42.00%
Total	1,163	1,014	

$X^2 = 57.765$

TABLE 2. Log Odds of Regressing Intimate Partner Violence on Polygyny (n=2,177)

	B	S.E.	Wald.	Sig.	Exp(B)	C.I.
Polygyny	0.694	0.092	57.01	<.001	2.002	1.672-2.398
Constant	-1.017	0.066	234.49	<.001	0.362	

-2 Log Likelihood = 2726.294

Cox & Snell = 0.026; Nagelkerke R² = .036

TABLE 3. Log Odds Factors Predicting IPV among Women in Polygynous Marriages(n=2,177)

	B	S.E.	Wald.	Sig.	Exp(B)	C.I.
Polygyny	0.53	0.100	28.321	<.001	1.699	1.398-2.065
Muslim	-0.169	0.183	0.856	0.355	0.844	.590-1.208
Caste	0.192	0.15	1.647	0.199	1.212	.904-1.625
Urban	0.032	0.14	0.052	0.819	1.033	.784-1.359
Education	-0.226	0.055	16.925	<.001	0.797	.716-.888
Wealth	-0.055	0.046	1.409	0.235	0.946	.946-1.037
Constant	-0.765	0.365	4.275	0.039	0.47	

-2 Log Likelihood = 2512.590

Cox & Snell = .044; Nagelkerke R² = .061

percent of other women who had been victims of marital assaults (X² = 57.765).

The regression models sought a deeper understanding of this pattern. Confirming the crosstab, the first hierarchical regression found that polygyny predicts IPV (Table 2). From the exp(b) figure, we see that women in polygynous marriages were just over two times more likely to experience marital violence than other women in India (p < .001; CI 1.672-2.398).

To test whether polygyny acts on violence independently of other factors related to IPV, controls were introduced in the second regression equation (Table 3). Under these conditions, polygynous women were still 1.7 times more likely to experience physical abuse in their marriages (exp(b) = 1.699; p < .001; CI 1.398-2.065). Interestingly and contrary to previous research, women's relative wealth position, being Islamic, caste position, and rural residence had no effect on the probability of IPV, controlling for form of marriage. In this context, only low education among women predicted violence (exp(b) = .797; p < .001; CI .716-.888) independently of polygyny. For every unit increase in educational achievement, the odds of IPV decrease by 20.3 percent [(1-.797) x 100].

In summary, consistent with previous research, the present data show that IPV is more common in polygynous marriages. When controls were added, polygyny remained a strong predictor of IPV, thus supporting the hypothesis that polygyny predicts violence independently of other conditions.

CONCLUSION

Because this study found that IPV in polygynous marriages occurs outside of predictors often associated with gendered violence in relationships, the notion that polygyny is a harmful cultural practice is supported. Polygyny itself presents as a cause of violence. By controlling for other factors, the relationship between polygyny and IPV is neither spurious nor indirect.

Polygyny, while indeed a cultural practice because it is perceived as normative in places where it occurs, is also a social construction. As a case in point, in India where polygyny is not common, it might be better conceived as a structural feature that favors men instead of a cultural phenomenon.

Regardless of geographic location, IPV is not cultural; rather, it is a function of male hegemony and a social hierarchy that awards men higher status and access to power. Marital violence is typically conceived as a means for men to maintain that power and their position of dominance (Heise 1998).

Polygyny, therefore, contributes to the structural theory of IPV, satisfying at least two of Michalski's (2004) structural prerequisites for violence against women. First, Michalski demonstrates that social intimacy and relationship distance are associated with IPV. Where less social distance and more intimacy are present, violence is less often found. The structural arrangements of polygyny would seem to foster more distance and less intimacy by definition. The possibility of developing strong social attachments is greatly diminished between husband and wife when one man is shared by multiple women. As time is a zero-sum commodity, the interaction between any one husband and wife pairing is grossly limited. If social intimacy is shared, it is still likely inadequate to form sufficiently strong bonds to lessen the likelihood of violence. The structural arrangements of polygyny make attachments less secure, a condition known to be associated with IPV (McKeown 2014).

Michalski determined that centralized familial authority is a second structural component of violent relationships. Polygynous marriages are male-centric and organized around husbands who serve as the primary authority figure of the family. That role entitles husbands to the labor and reproductive rights of their wives. One part of that authoritative role is conflict resolution. Given the patriarchal character of polygyny, the husband may feel that violence is his privilege in solving problems. IPV, which is often framed as a form of dispute resolution in relationships (Bonache et al. 2019), increases in probability in polygynous marriages because of husbands' command

position in the family structure and the numerous conflicts found in these marriages (Ahinkorah (2021).

Redefining polygyny as structural rather than cultural allows us to understand the power element implied in this marital form. While it is true that in Sub-Saharan Africa polygyny often serves an economic function, violence is more common within polygynous marriages there, and women are frequently denied nutrition and health care (Ahinkorah 2021).

As the present data show, polygyny largely acts independently to predict IPV in India. The one variable exception is that low educational achievement was also shown to predict violence in both polygynous and non-polygynous marriages. This finding is not surprising and is consistent with previous research (Ackerson et al. 2008). That low education is also predictive of IPV furthers the notion that violence against women is a structural phenomenon in that access to education is often refused to girls and women in India and elsewhere where polygyny is common.

The approach taken here is that the polygynous marital structure allows men to control multiple women through the need to maintain order through violence. To conceptualize polygyny solely as an element of culture limits our ability to see the power differentials inherent in polygyny and to observe the means in which this marital form contributes to gender inequality.

REFERENCES

- Abebe, H., Beyene, G. A., & Mulat, B. S. (2021). Harmful cultural practices during perinatal period and associated factors among women of childbearing age in Southern Ethiopia: Community based cross-sectional study. *PLOS ONE*, *16*(7), e0254095. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0254095>
- Aboagye, R. G., Essuman, M. A., Dzirasah, K. D., Seidu, A.-A., Adnani, Q. E. S., & Ahinkorah, B. O. (2025). Association between polygyny and justification of violence among women in sexual unions in sub-Saharan Africa. *BMC Public Health*, *25*(1), 1719. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-025-22581-y>
- Ackerson, L. K., Kawachi, I., Barbeau, E.M., and S. V. Subramanian. 2008. "Effects of Individual and Proximate Educational Context on Intimate Partner Violence: A Population-Based Study of Women in India." *American Journal of Public Health* *98*(3):507–14. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2007.113738.
- Ahinkorah, B. O. (2021). Polygyny and intimate partner violence in sub-Saharan Africa: Evidence from 16 cross-sectional demographic and health surveys. *SJM - Population Health*, *13*, 100729. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2021.100729>
- Bonache, H., Gonzalez-Mendez, R., & Krahé, B. (2019). Adult Attachment Styles, Destructive Conflict Resolution, and the Experience of Intimate Partner Violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *34*(2), 287–309. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260516640776>
- Heise, L. L. (1998). Violence Against Women: An Integrated, Ecological Framework. *Violence Against Women*, *4*(3), 262–290. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801298004003002>
- Kumari, N., & Ram, R. (2025). Socio-economic and demographic determinants of polygynous marriages in India: Multilevel analysis of nationally representative survey, 2019-21. *Sexuality & Culture*, *29*(3), 1174–1192. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-025-10318-3>
- Lawson, D. W., James, S., Ngadaya, E., Ngowi, B., Mfinanga, S. G. M., & Borgerhoff Mulder, M. (2015). No evidence that polygynous marriage is a harmful cultural practice in northern Tanzania. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *112*(45), 13827–13832. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1507151112>
- McKeown, A. (2014). Attachment, personality and female perpetrators of intimate partner violence. *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*, *25*(5), 556–573. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14789949.2014.943792>
- Michalski, J.H. (2004). Making sociological sense out of trends in intimate partner violence: The social structure of violence against women. *Violence Against Women*, *10*(6), 652–675. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801204265018>
- McDermott, R. (2018). *The meaning and meanness of polygyny*. Cornell University Press.
- Rahaman, M., Roy, A., Kapasia, N., & Chouhan, P. (2022). Spousal violence in India: Does risk of spousal violence higher among polygynous unions? *Cogent Social Sciences*, *8*(1), 2103945. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2022.2103945>
- United Nations. (2026). *Harmful practices; OHCHR and women's human rights and gender equality*. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/women/harmful-practices#:~:text=Gender%20Accreditation%20Programme,Issues%20in%20of%20girls%20and%20women>