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Religion

## Some Muslims in U.S. Quietly Engage in Polygamy

by Barbara Bradley Hagerty

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*This is part one of a two-part report.*

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[All Things Considered](#), May 27, 2008 · Although polygamy is illegal in the U.S. and most mosques try to discourage plural marriages, some Muslim men in America have quietly married multiple wives.

No one knows how many Muslims in the U.S. live in polygamous families. But according to academics researching the issue, estimates range from 50,000 to 100,000 people.

You can see some of the women involved in polygamous marriages in the lobby of Sanctuary for Families, a nonprofit women's center in New York City. It bursts with color as a dozen women in bright African dresses and head wraps gather for a weekly noon meeting for West African immigrants. The women come each week to this support group where they discuss hard issues, such as domestic abuse, medical problems, immigration hurdles and polygamy.

Polygamy is freely practiced in parts of Africa, and almost every one of the women in the group has experienced polygamy firsthand – either as a wife in a plural marriage or having been raised in families with one father who has two or more wives.

Group member Sarah says that in her native Guinea, the husband springs it on his wife that he's going to marry someone else. Sarah, like the others interviewed for this story, would give only her first name.

"Sometimes he say, 'OK, I am going to be married tomorrow,' or 'I'm going to be married today.' He's going ask you like that. It happened to me," she says.

Sarah begins to cry. Others nod in sympathy. These women are all Muslim. The Koran states that men may marry up to four women. The Prophet Mohammad had multiple wives.

But there's a restriction, says Sally, another group member. The husband cannot favor one woman over another – with his wealth or his heart.

"You have to love them the same way, share everything the same way, equally," says Sally. "Nobody can do that. It's impossible."

### Invisible Lives

Still, Muslims practice polygamy in the U.S., despite state laws prohibiting it.

Here's how a man gets around the laws: He marries one woman under civil law, and then marries one, two or three others in religious ceremonies that are not recognized by the state. In other cases, men marry women in both America and abroad.

Many women keep quiet for fear of retribution or deportation.

For example, Sally's husband moved to the United States from the Ivory Coast before she did. When Sally joined him, she found he had married someone else in America. But without legal immigration papers, she didn't dare come forward and report him to the authorities.

She said when she arrived in the U.S., her husband and his new wife put her in the basement.

"They told me to cook, clean, do everything. I didn't speak English. And he told me, 'Don't say nothing. You say something, she's going to make you deported. And me, I'm going to be in jail.'"

Eventually, Sally left the house with her children, and now works at a hair braiding salon. But that fear of deportation prevents many from leaving their polygamous relationships.

"Legally, they're invisible," says Julie Dinnerstein, a senior attorney for Sanctuary for Families. "If you are the second or third or fourth wife, that marital relationship is not going to be recognized for immigration purposes. It means if your husband is a citizen or green card holder, he can't sponsor you. It means if your husband gets asylum, you don't get asylum at the same time. The man is always going to be in a position of greater power."

### **Secret Ceremonies**

In the past decade, Muslim clerics began to notice that some men who wanted a religious wedding were already married to someone else.

According to Daisy Khan, who heads the American Society for Muslim Advancement and is married to an imam, polygamy is more common among conservative, less educated immigrants from Africa and Asia. It is rarer among middle-class Muslims from the Middle East. She adds that nowadays, imams do background checks on the grooms to make sure they're not already married in their home countries.

Some clerics in the U.S. perform second marriage ceremonies in secret.

Khan, who does pre-marriage counseling, says she always raises the issue of polygamy with engaged couples.

"I also explain to them that as a woman, you have certain rights, and as a man, he may one day exercise his right to have a second wife," Khan says. "And usually the man says, 'No, no, no. I'm never going to do that.' And I say, 'Well, in case you ever get tempted, how about we put that in the contract?'"

### **For Others, a Blessing**

Abed Awad, a family law attorney in New Jersey, says for many Muslim men, multiple wives means many children — which is considered a blessing in Islam. And since Islam allows for sexual relations only in marriage, polygamy legitimizes the relationship in God's eyes.

Awad says conservative Muslims argue that in polygamy, "You're actually responsible for that person as your spouse. And the sexual relationship becomes a relationship of love and companionship as opposed to just a sexual fling."

Awad stresses he does not condone polygamy. But he says some conservative Muslim women see some advantages — particularly those who are divorced or widowed.

Mona, a Palestinian woman with six children from her first marriage, is happy to be a second wife. When

Mona got divorced in 1990, she became a pariah in her conservative Muslim community in Patterson, N.J.

"When ladies divorce," she says, "the people look down on her — looking to her like [she's] second class."

Then 14 years ago, a man approached her to be his second wife. She resisted at first but then grew to admire him and agreed to become his wife. She says her problems evaporated.

"When I married the second husband, everybody's OK," she says, smiling. "If I go anywhere, I'm free, nobody talks, because I have a husband."

He provides for both of his families, and he divides time between the two homes. Mona says the first wife was initially angry, but she got used to it.

"What is the problem? If he is not happy with the first marriage, why he stay all the life like this? You know, my religion is good because it gives man and woman another chance to be happy."

NPR is not revealing Mona's last name, and her husband would not be interviewed for this story. Her husband could be charged with bigamy.

### 'One Is Enough'

At Mam African Hair Braiding salon in Queens, N.Y., husbands are often the topic of conversation.

As the Senegalese owner, Miriam Dougrou, weaves cornrows on a young woman, she says that her father married four women and she had 19 or 20 siblings. She lost count. So did her father.

"Sometimes he doesn't know who's who, and he forget the name" of his children and wives, she said.

"He calls them No. 1 and No. 2," says Dougrou's husband, Timothy.

Miriam Dougrou does not want Timothy to have a second wife. "Sometime he talked about it — like a joke. But I told him, 'I'm not joking. Don't tease me because I won't be a second wife. I'm going to be the first and last wife.'"

So does Timothy, who's sitting in the corner keeping awfully quiet, want a second wife?

"No," he says with a half smile. "One is enough for me."

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