

Misconception: Polygamy – Muslim men can have as many wives as they wish



Background: Some think that Muslim men can have multiple wives if they desire to and that Islam and The Quran promotes polygamy.

The Quran is very clear on this subject, that monogamy is the basis for normal relationships, while polygamy is only allowed in cases involving marrying the mothers of orphans so that the orphans are taken care of. A maximum of four wives are allowed in such cases. For example, in the aftermath of war, it is likely that many men would have lost their lives, resulting in many widows with fatherless children, thus The Quran allows an exception in these cases so that the needs of the wider community can be met:

Give the orphans* their money; do not replace the good with the bad, and do not consume their money to your money, for truly it is a great sin! And if you fear that you cannot be just to the orphans, then you may marry those who are agreeable to you of the women: two, and three, and four. But if you fear you will not be fair, then only one**, or to whom you are committed to by oath. This is best that you do not face financial hardship. [4:3]

*the Arabic word for "orphans" is "yatama" and specifically means children who are fatherless.
** note the emphasis on one wife, i.e. Monogamy.

Again, the subject of polygamy is addressed in the context of orphans see: 4:127

The Quran shows a preference for monogamy in the following verse:

And marry the single from among you as well as the good from among your male and female servants. If they are poor, then God will grant them from His grace. God is Encompassing, Knowledgeable. [24:32]

To summarise, The Quran was revealed to a society where polygamy was commonplace and men could have many wives (e.g. more than four for example). By setting an upper limit, citing a moral restriction on polygamy and limiting the situations in which it is allowed would result in reducing polygamy significantly.