

Polygamy is a reality for some families

Rachel Woodlock

Published: June 28, 2008 - 12:00AM

There may be an argument, even a feminist one, for allowing polygamous marriages.

IF EVER a man flirts with the idea of marrying more than one wife, he should surely be dissuaded from the idea by watching a season of *Big Love* — a fictional television drama about the polygamous family of a fundamentalist Mormon man whose life is constantly troubled with jealous intrigue, betrayal and psychotic in-laws. I am writing tongue-in-cheek, but since embracing Islam I have become friends with about half-a-dozen different women who are co-wives (none of them with each other). Tellingly, all the relationships involved include at least one convert, which means that polygamy is not merely the preserve of refugees who can barely speak a lick of English and who know nothing of our culture or way of life.

Whether or not we like to admit it, polygamy is part of the diverse fabric of family life in 21st century Australia, although admittedly a minority practice. This is partly because although Australian multiculturalism requires assent to the law of the land, many groups (for example, Jews, Catholics, Baha'is and Aborigines) also operate under community-imposed religio-legal codes, particularly when it comes to family relationships.

The presumably small number of Muslims who are polygamous can easily circumvent Australian law because they are merely engaging in religious relationships that have no legal standing. In most traditional interpretations of Islamic law, all that is required for a marriage to be religiously valid is an offer of marriage, including a dowry paid to the woman, and an acceptance of that offer in front of witnesses. Women may include conditions in the marriage contract, including monogamy.

Which brings us to Muslim attitudes towards polygamy. When news started filtering around the Australian Muslim grapevine of lobbying for polygamy to be recognised, reactions ranged from outrage to ambivalence to cautious approval. If ever there was evidence that Muslims do not speak with a single, homogeneous voice, this is it.

Muslims come from many different cultures, some of which historically viewed polygamy with great disapproval and imbued it with social stigma, and others that considered polygamy perfectly normal, although it seems the practice is becoming less popular even in many traditionally polygamous countries. This is not unlike the seismic shift Irish society has undergone in its attitudes to large families and contraception. My Irish husband's great-aunt had 17 children, now you're lucky if the average Catholic family has more than two or three.

For some reason, though, the topic of polygamy raises passionate debate. This is often because of the presumption — and indeed, at times, the reality — of the women involved getting short shrift. However, much depends on the autonomy of the women involved, and there is even a feminist argument to be made for polygamy.

The late professor Susan Hurley, in *The Future of Gender*, argues that the social glue of monogamy may be the result of our historical division of labour into hunters (men) and gatherers (women). Strong social boundaries around paired unions meant that men were less likely to be cuckolded when they went off to hunt for their females and offspring.

As well, the upward mobility of women who might marry polygamous men with the resources to care for multiple wives and children could leave a dangerous number of lower-status males without sexual unions. She writes: "Official monogamy may do less to protect the interests of women than to enforce sexual equality among men."

Some supporters of polygamy point out that so long as all the partners involved are consenting, polygamy can offer alternative patterns of family life that satisfy different needs. Take the woman who desires a family but who fears jeopardising her career success if she takes time out to raise children, coupled with one who longs for a large family with lots of children but who faces fertility issues, then a polygamous arrangement might suit them.

Nevertheless, the reality is that polygamy can leave women and children vulnerable. Ironically, it is probably easier to abuse polygamy in Australia, than in traditional Muslim societies, for Islamic law insists that polygamous men be held accountable for their responsibilities, particularly as the Koran warns that if a man is unable to treat more than one wife with justice, then he may not consider polygamy. Does that mean we should change Australian law? I am not sure, but we should at least acknowledge that polygamy is a reality for some families, and think about how best we might support the most vulnerable in such situations.

Rachel Woodlock is a doctoral candidate and researcher at the Centre for Islam and the Modern World, Monash University.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/federal-politics/polygamy-is-a-reality-for-some-families-20080627-2y2k.html>