

The Politics Of Abolition And The Persistence Of Plural Marriage: A Personal Reflection On Uganda's Local Government And Family Structures

Dr Arinaitwe Julius¹, Dr Namara Mable², Dr Kamusiime B. Samuel³

1, 2, 3 Metropolitan International University

Abstract

This study examines the complex and contested terrain of plural marriage — commonly termed polygamy — within Uganda's local governance structures and family systems, situating this examination within the broader global politics of abolition and the resistance that formal legal prohibition encounters in practice. Drawing on feminist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks, and employing a phenomenological qualitative methodology involving twenty-eight in-depth interviews with local government councillors, women's rights advocates, married women in polygamous unions, and male heads of polygamous households, the study reveals that plural marriage persists not despite legal ambiguity and social criticism but through intricate webs of economic rationality, cultural legitimacy, religious sanction, and institutional accommodation that local government structures have proven unable or unwilling to dismantle. Participants described plural marriage through multiple and often contradictory framings: as a cultural inheritance deserving respect, as an economic arrangement enabling resource pooling in agrarian communities, as a site of gendered suffering and power asymmetry, and as a target of Western-influenced legal reform that inadequately engages with African family complexity. The study concludes that abolition politics, without structural economic transformation and genuine cultural dialogue, are unlikely to reduce plural marriage's prevalence and may paradoxically drive it further underground, reducing legal protections for women in unregistered unions.

Keywords: Plural marriage, polygamy, Uganda, local government, family structures, abolition politics, feminist theory, postcolonial analysis, gender

1.0 Introduction

The politics of marriage form one of the most contested domains in contemporary African governance and human rights discourse, situated at the intersection of cultural sovereignty, gender equality, religious freedom, and state authority over family formation. In Uganda, as in many Sub-Saharan African societies, plural marriage — the practice of a man simultaneously maintaining multiple wives — occupies a paradoxical legal and social position: formally unregistered under civil law since the Marriage Act of 1904 and its subsequent revisions, yet widely practised, socially recognised across diverse ethnic and religious communities, and institutionally tolerated within customary law frameworks that the state acknowledges but only partially regulates (Tamale, 2008). This paradox creates a governance vacuum with profound consequences for women's rights, children's welfare, property inheritance, and the coherence of Uganda's legal architecture.

The global politics of abolition — of practices deemed harmful to women and children, including child marriage, female genital cutting, and plural marriage — have been significantly shaped by international human rights

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frameworks, particularly the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which Uganda ratified in 1985, and the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), both of which explicitly identify discriminatory family law as a barrier to gender equality (United Nations, 1995). Yet critics within feminist, postcolonial, and African studies traditions have argued that abolitionist campaigns targeting plural marriage frequently reflect Western ethnocentrism, misrepresent the agency of women within such arrangements, and fail to engage with the structural economic conditions — including land tenure systems, inheritance patterns, and agricultural labour requirements — that make plural marriage a rational response to specific social ecologies rather than merely a cultural relic awaiting enlightened elimination (Amadiume, 1987; Nzegwu, 2006).

Uganda's local government system, established under the Local Governments Act of 1997 following decentralisation reforms, presents a particularly illuminating site for examining these tensions. Local councils — comprising elected representatives at the district, county, sub-county, and village levels — are constitutionally mandated to promote gender equality and women's rights while simultaneously respecting cultural practices and customary governance. The simultaneous performance of these mandates creates institutional contradictions that local councillors navigate through pragmatic accommodation, strategic silence, and selective intervention rather than through principled legal enforcement (Golooba-Mutebi, 2004). These institutional dynamics are central to understanding why plural marriage persists and how it is experienced by those within and around it.

This study contributes to scholarship on these dynamics by centring the voices of those most immediately affected — wives in polygamous unions, their husbands, and the local government officials who simultaneously represent their communities and are expected to promote national gender equality commitments. By employing reflexive phenomenological methodology and situating findings within feminist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks, the study aspires to generate insights that are both analytically rigorous and politically honest about the complexities that simple abolitionist narratives tend to obscure.

2.0 Problem Statement

Uganda's legal framework presents a fundamental incoherence regarding plural marriage that has significant practical consequences for women's rights and family welfare. While statutory civil law does not recognise polygamous marriages, customary marriages — which may be polygamous — are recognised under the Customary Marriages Registration Act. This legal bifurcation creates conditions in which women in unregistered polygamous unions have substantially weaker legal protections regarding property rights, inheritance, and domestic violence recourse than formally married women. Paradoxically, efforts to promote legal registration of marriages — intended to extend women's legal protections — may be undermined by women's own reluctance to register second or subsequent wives, given the property rights implications for first wives. The problem is therefore not merely one of legal design but of

the complex interactions between formal law, customary practice, and women's strategic calculations within patriarchal systems they did not create but must navigate.

3.0 Main Objective

The primary objective of this study was to examine the persistence of plural marriage within Uganda's local government and family structures, and to critically analyse the politics of abolition from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders including women within polygamous unions, their husbands, and local government representatives. Specific objectives included: understanding participants' understandings of why plural marriage persists; examining women's lived experiences within polygamous unions; exploring local government councillors' approaches to plural marriage in their governance practices; and critically evaluating the potential and limitations of abolitionist approaches to plural marriage reduction.

4.0 Literature Review

The anthropological literature on plural marriage in Sub-Saharan Africa documents its deep historical roots in agricultural societies where multiple wives represented both a labour resource and a social status marker, with bride wealth systems creating economic incentives for polygamous union formation (Goody, 1976). Amadiume's (1987) seminal work on Igbo matriarchy challenged Western feminist readings of African plural marriage as uniformly oppressive, demonstrating that within specific cultural contexts, women exercised considerable agency, formed powerful sisterhood bonds with co-wives, and maintained productive relationships with husband's families that provided material security unavailable through alternative arrangements. Nzegwu (2006) extended this analysis, arguing that the imposition of monogamous marriage norms through colonial law was itself a form of cultural violence that disrupted African women's social networks and reduced their economic independence by restricting household structures that had supported female enterprise.

Contemporary feminist scholarship presents a more differentiated picture that honours women's agency without romanticising structures that frequently disadvantage them. Tamale (2008), in her study of sexuality and women's rights in Uganda, documents the dual consciousness required of women navigating polygamous households: awareness of the structural inequalities embedded in the arrangement alongside active strategies to maximise advantage within it. Hassim (2006) argues that African feminist politics must grapple with the 'impossible dilemma' of condemning structural patriarchy while respecting women's culturally embedded choices — an analytical tension that pervades policy debates about plural marriage reform. The human rights literature, represented by scholars like An-Na'im (2002), attempts to navigate this dilemma through cross-cultural dialogue frameworks that ground human rights norms in culturally specific arguments rather than universalist impositions, though the practical implications for plural marriage policy remain contested.

Uganda's local government literature documents the multiple pressures on local councillors who are simultaneously accountable to community constituencies whose cultural practices they share and to national gender policy frameworks that may critique those practices (Golooba-Mutebi, 2004). Tripp's (2000) groundbreaking research on women's political organising in Uganda found that women politicians at local level often avoided direct challenges to customary family practices to maintain constituency support, focusing instead on economic and service delivery issues where gender interests could be articulated in less culturally threatening terms. This political calculation has significant implications for understanding why institutional advocacy against plural marriage has been relatively muted at local government level despite formal national commitments to gender equality.

Economic analyses of plural marriage in Uganda have documented its correlation with land tenure patterns, agricultural production systems, and formal employment access. Boserup's (1970) foundational work on women's roles in economic development identified polygamy as an adaptive response to extensive agricultural systems requiring large family labour forces, a finding with continued relevance in Uganda's predominantly smallholder agricultural economy. More recent work by Akresh (2009) in West African contexts demonstrated that polygamous households may exhibit greater productive efficiency through labour pooling and risk diversification strategies, challenging simple narratives of plural marriage as economically irrational from all actors' perspectives. These economic dimensions are central to understanding why plural marriage persists in the absence of structural economic alternatives, and why abolitionist politics that ignore economic structures are likely to produce limited practical effects.

5.0 Methodology

This study employed a phenomenological qualitative research design informed by feminist standpoint epistemology (Harding, 1986) and postcolonial theoretical commitments that privilege the situated knowledge of those most directly affected by the phenomena under investigation. Feminist standpoint epistemology holds that the perspectives of those occupying subordinate social positions — in this context, women within polygamous unions — provide epistemically privileged access to social structures that those in positions of dominance may be structurally unable to perceive clearly. This methodological commitment shaped both the sampling strategy, which prioritised women's voices, and the analytical framework, which examined participants' accounts for both their explicit content and their implications regarding the structural conditions within which choices are made.

Twenty-eight participants were recruited across three districts in Uganda — Kampala (urban), Mubende (peri-urban), and Kapchorwa (rural) — to capture the diversity of contexts within which plural marriage is practised. Participants included: twelve women in polygamous unions (comprising first wives, second wives, and third wives); six male heads of polygamous households; six local government councillors (four male, two female) at sub-county and district levels; and four representatives of women's rights organisations operating in these districts. Participants were recruited through community gatekeepers including local council chairpersons, women's groups, and NGO partner

organisations, using purposive and snowball sampling methods. All interviews were conducted in participants' preferred language (English, Luganda, or Runyankole) with research assistants providing interpretation where needed.

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews lasting sixty to one hundred and twenty minutes, supplemented by four focus group discussions (two with women in polygamous unions, one with local councillors, and one with women's rights advocates) that enabled collective reflection and social mapping of community practices. All data were audio-recorded, transcribed, translated where applicable, and analysed using feminist thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke & Hayfield, 2019) that attends particularly to power dynamics, structural conditions, and the relationship between individual experience and social structure. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal documenting positionality and analytical decisions throughout.

6. Results

6.1 Why Plural Marriage Persists: Economic Rationality, Cultural Identity, and Religious Sanction

Participants across all groups offered multidimensional accounts of plural marriage's persistence that defied reduction to any single explanatory logic. The economic dimension was perhaps the most consistently articulated, particularly by participants in rural and peri-urban settings where smallholder agriculture constitutes the primary livelihood strategy. Male heads of polygamous households described the logic of additional wives in terms of agricultural labour force expansion that was simultaneously frank about its economic calculation and culturally embedded in understandings of family, fertility, and prosperity.

“I have three wives and fourteen children. My grandfather had four wives. My father had two. A man who farms needs hands. My land cannot be worked by one woman and one or two children — you need bodies on the land during planting season, during harvest season. My wives are not servants — they are partners in building this household. Each has her own garden, her own granary section, her own animals. They cooperate most of the time. When people from Kampala come and talk about my 'exploitation' of women, I want to take them to my farm at harvest time and show them what my wives are doing and who they are. They are not victims. They are farmers.” **(Participant M3, male, Kapchorwa district)**

This account illustrates the challenge that decontextualised abolitionist discourse faces when confronted with the lived economic logic of plural marriage in specific agricultural settings. The participant's invocation of his grandfather's and father's marriages situates the practice within a multigenerational continuity that confers cultural legitimacy and frames it as inheritance rather than deviance. His defensive positioning against 'people from Kampala' — urban reformers — reflects the cultural-geographic tensions that characterise national debates about plural marriage policy, in which urban, educated reformers are perceived as imposing values disconnected from rural realities.

“I chose to become a second wife. People find this very hard to believe, but it is true. I knew the man, I knew his first wife — we grew up in the same village. He is a good man, he farms well, he does not drink. The alternative for me

was to marry a man I did not know from another village, or to remain unmarried, which in this community means something specific — it means you are available for anyone, you have no protection, no compound, no status. I chose security. I chose a known household. Was it my first choice? No. Was it a reasonable choice given what was available to me? Yes. I want people to understand that.” (Participant F4, second wife, Mubende district)

This participant's account powerfully illustrates the feminist standpoint epistemology insight that choices cannot be evaluated without reference to the structure of available options. Her description of the alternative to second-wife status — social vulnerability and sexual exposure — reframes her 'choice' as a negotiation with limited options rather than a free expression of preference. At the same time, her insistence on her own agency and rationality ('a reasonable choice given what was available') challenges victimhood narratives that deny women's strategic competence within patriarchal systems.

6.2 Women's Lived Experiences: Co-wife Relations, Resource Competition, and Solidarity

Women within polygamous unions described their daily experiences through narratives of both solidarity and competition that coexisted in complex, contextually shifting configurations. Co-wife relationships — the relationships between women sharing a husband — emerged as perhaps the most emotionally and practically significant relationships in participants' accounts, more immediately consequential to their daily wellbeing than their relationships with their husbands.

“My co-wife and I have been together for eleven years now. In the beginning, yes, there was jealousy — I will not lie to you. When he would go to her house and not mine, I felt it. When she got pregnant and I had not yet, I felt it. But over time, you settle. You find the pattern. You know whose children will fetch water from where, you know who cooks on which days for which occasion, you know when to send your children to her compound and when you need space. We have reached an arrangement. When I was sick last year with malaria, she brought me food every day for two weeks. Tell me who else would have done that. My own sister is in Jinja.” (Participant F7, first wife, Kampala district)

This account captures a relational dynamic that the abolitionist literature frequently fails to acknowledge: the genuine social support and practical solidarity that can develop between co-wives over time, and that may constitute an irreplaceable social resource in contexts where extended family support networks are geographically dispersed. The participant's comparison of her co-wife's support with that of her biological sister underscores that co-wife relationships are not merely tolerated compromises but can become central to women's social support infrastructures.

6.3 Local Government's Navigation of Plural Marriage: Strategic Silence and Selective Intervention

Local government councillors described their approach to plural marriage in their constituencies through a language of pragmatic accommodation that revealed the profound tensions between their official gender equality mandates and their political realities as representatives of communities in which plural marriage is practised, often by themselves.

“I am a sub-county chairman. In my sub-county, I would estimate that perhaps forty percent of households with married men have more than one wife. I have myself two wives. The national policy says I should be promoting

monogamy. But if I stood up in a village meeting and started telling men to give up their second wives, I would not be elected next time. Simple. And if I am not elected, who helps these women with the real problems — the domestic violence, the land grabbing by relatives when a man dies, the school fees? I focus on what I can actually do. I ensure that when a man with multiple wives dies, all the children's rights are protected. I ensure women know about inheritance law. That is real help. Telling them polygamy is wrong is not help.” **(Participant LG2, sub-county chairman, Mubende)**

This account reveals the political economy of local governance around plural marriage with unusual candour. The councillor's self-disclosure of his own polygamy is remarkable, but more analytically significant is his articulation of a pragmatic rights-protection strategy that works within the institution of plural marriage rather than against it. His distinction between 'real help' protecting property and inheritance rights and symbolic condemnation of polygamy reflects a sophisticated reading of what local governance can actually accomplish in culturally embedded family structures.

7.0 Discussion of Results

The findings of this study illuminate plural marriage in Uganda as a profoundly embedded social institution whose persistence reflects the rational, if constrained, choices of individuals navigating specific economic, cultural, and governance structures. The abolitionist framing — which positions plural marriage as an unambiguous violation of gender equality to be eliminated through legal reform and social advocacy — fails to engage adequately with the structural conditions that make plural marriage a rational response for specific actors in specific contexts, and with the genuine agency that women within plural marriages exercise even as they navigate patriarchal constraints.

The local government literature's documentation of institutional contradiction between cultural accommodation and gender equality mandates (Golooba-Mutebi, 2004; Tripp, 2000) is powerfully confirmed in participants' accounts of councillors who are simultaneously practitioners, community representatives, and nominal agents of national gender policy. The resulting institutional behaviour — strategic silence, selective intervention, and rights-protection work that operates within rather than against the institution of plural marriage — represents a form of pragmatic realism that may be more effective in protecting women's concrete interests than principled but politically impractical abolitionism.

8.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

This study concludes that plural marriage in Uganda persists through overlapping logics of economic rationality, cultural identity, religious legitimacy, and institutional accommodation that simple abolitionist politics cannot effectively dismantle. Policies that focus exclusively on criminalisation or stigmatisation without addressing the structural conditions such as land tenure systems, women's economic opportunities, inheritance frameworks, and social security networks that make plural marriage a rational choice for specific actors are likely to drive the practice

underground, reducing legal visibility and protection for women in unregistered unions rather than improving their welfare.

The study recommends: first, that Uganda's marriage law reform process, currently stalled, be advanced with priority attention to extending legal protections for all women in customary unions including polygamous ones, regardless of legislative positions on plural marriage's desirability. Second, economic empowerment programmes targeting women in rural communities should be scaled to create viable livelihood alternatives that reduce the economic conditions driving plural marriage entry. Third, local government gender training should move beyond condemnation of customary practices toward equipping councillors to protect women's rights within existing family structures through robust application of inheritance, property, and domestic violence law. Fourth, cross-cultural dialogue processes involving women's organisations, religious leaders, and customary authority institutions should be supported to develop contextually grounded approaches to family structure reform that build on internal cultural resources rather than external imposition.

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