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Women, Polygyny and Power

Michelle J. Lundeen

This paper focuses on the power possessed by polygynous women within the domestic sphere, comparing women in wealth-increasing polygynous societies (represented by the Swazi of Africa and the Mormons of North America) with women in sororal polygynous societies (represented by the Mardudjara of Australia and the Achuar of South America) in an effort to determine which of these patterns is related to greater domestic power for women.

Polygynous women do indeed have power, as defined by Schlegel: "From my point of view, the status of men and women within the dimension of power derives from their ability to control their own persons and activities and the persons and activities of others" (Schlegel 1977:8). The power of women varies in different types of polygynous societies. Schlegel points out that, "It is perfectly obvious that at all times and places most women center their activities around the domestic sphere..." (Schlegel 1972:23); this paper focuses on the comparison of "power within the domestic realm" in wealth-increasing polygynous societies versus sororal polygynous societies.

In her book, *Male Dominance and Female Autonomy*, Schlegel looks at sororal and non sororal polygyny to determine which women have greater autonomy, or "freedom from control by others" (Schlegel 1977:9). She discusses female autonomy in- and outside of the home, using the term "female autonomy" rather than "status of women," because she believes that "the latter is misleading, in that it overlooks the functional differences of the sex roles and defines female activities in relation to male activities, i.e., the more women can participate in activities performed by men, the higher their status" (Schlegel 1972:23).

Schlegel also looks at sexual status and the roles of men and women across societies in an article entitled, "Toward a Theory of Sexual Stratification," concluding that, "It is important to recognize that even in sexually stratified societies, there are mitigating circumstances that check male dominance and permit women to gain some measure of autonomy" (Schlegel 1977:355).

POLYGyny

Polygyny is a marriage style in which a man has more than one wife. White's cross-cultural study (1988) classified two general patterns of polygyny, wealth-increasing and sororal (Hames 1996).

Wealth-increasing polygyny (White 1988) is non sororal, which means that the co-wives are not sisters. It occurs in societies in which there is an economic stratification among men. The wealthier males have more wives and there is not a limit to the number of wives a man can

have, as long as he can support them. In this case, each wife is an independent economic unit. In the majority of the situations the wives have their own houses and take care of their own gardens. Being isolated from the husband's other wives is said to prevent jealousy and frequent arguing.

Sororal polygyny (White 1988) is described as a marriage in which a man is married to two or more sisters. This is considered the "best kind" of polygyny, because the sisters get along well and are not jealous; nonetheless, this type is found in fewer societies than is non sororal polygyny. In societies which practice sororal polygyny, there is little or no economic stratification between men, but there are status differences: a man might be a shaman, a good hunter or an excellent warrior. In this kind of society men can marry two, three or four wives; the husband and all of the wives live in the same house and eat together.

Power in the Domestic Realm

The power that women have differs in these two types of societies. The following terms will be used to differentiate the type and amount of power that women in different societies have: *economic, social, and reproductive*.

Economic power. Three indices were used to determine whether a woman has economic power: 1) if a woman lives in her own house; 2) if she has her own garden and grows her own food; and 3) if a woman has privileges because she is a senior co-wife and thus has a say in who her husband's next wife will be (in this way the senior wife can help pick out a woman who is a good worker so it benefits her).

Social power. Social power has five indices: 1) if a woman is a queen she has more power than women who are not queens; 2) if bridewealth is a part of the marriage agreement (the bridewealth makes it more likely that a husband will treat his wife properly or the wife has the right to leave and take the bridewealth with her); 3) if the society prefers sororal marriage (cooperation allows the wives to pool their power rather than competing for "access to the center of power in the home" [Schlegel

1972:23]); 4) if the women are used to form alliances between families or groups; and 5) whether or not the women are likely to be beaten by their husbands.

Reproductive power. Reproductive power includes three indices: 1) if a woman has many children, because men want to have many children; 2) if a woman is young, and therefore has more reproductive power; and 3) if the woman lives in a society in which mothers pledge their unborn daughters in marriage (women are in control of the choice of a future son-in-law).

Women can also have different degrees of power within the domestic realm: *great power, moderate power and limited power.*

Great power. Great power means that within each type of power (economic, social and reproductive) women have the majority of the indices. To have *great economic power* or *great reproductive power*, women have to achieve all indices. To have *great social power*, women have to achieve the majority of the indices.

Moderate and limited power. *Moderate power* means that within each type of power, women have about half of the indices. *Limited power* means that within each realm of power, economic, social and reproductive, women have only a few or none of the indices.

Four societies where polygyny is or has been practiced include the Swazi in Africa, the Mardudjara of Australia, the Achuar in Ecuador and the Mormons of the United States. Both the Swazi and the Mormons practice(d) wealth-increasing polygyny; the Mardudjara and the Achuar practice sororal polygyny.

Polygyny in Swaziland

The Swazi, of Swaziland in southeast Africa, practice wealth-increasing polygyny. Here the women possess all three powers, economic, social and reproductive.

In the economic realm the women have their own house, their own garden, and grow their own food. Within the social realm, the power Swazi women hold includes the custom of bridewealth, the use of women to form alliances, the possibility that some women may become queen in this society, and the fact that senior wives have privileges.

Swazi polygynous women have reproductive power because women are valued if they have many children. It should be noted that some women in monogamous societies also have many children; however, the power that monogamous women have in the domestic realm is

not determined by the amount of children that they can produce, as it is among many polygynous women.

Economic power among the Swazi women. Swazi women have economic power because they have their own houses and their own gardens where they grow their own food (Barker 1965). In common homesteads, after the new bride provides service to her mother-in-law, she is given her own individual sleeping, cooking, and storage hut. These are usually her private places so they are closed off from the public. A bride is also presented with her own plot of land from the family garden. Here she is permitted to grow food and cultivate her garden. Sometimes a bride is even given cattle to use. In this way she is a semi-independent and economic unit. At her own place a woman leads a private life with her children.

Social power among the Swazi women. Swazi women have social power because bridewealth is involved in their marriages. Marriage is a complex business that involves a payment of goods and services to the parents of the bride (Andrews 1970). Because of the expense of bridewealth, usually only people of high standing (the wealthy and many times the elderly common people) can afford to practice polygyny. Generally the brideprice is in the form of cattle, and can only be returned under certain conditions. It is sometimes used to resolve disputes between a husband and wife. Also, women have social power because a Swazi marriage is basically the aligning of two families instead of two people (Kuper 1963), and the women are necessary to help form these alliances.

The head of the Swazi is a hereditary king. The king is expected to have many more wives than any of his subjects (Barker 1965); a king has been known to have as many as forty wives. The wives of the king, the queens, have more power, (control and influence) than a woman who is not a queen.

"In polygynous societies of the African kind there is no inhibition on adding full wives" (Goody 1976:51). In this society, a non-sororal society, men tend to have many wives. Many wives are a privilege to men who can afford them. A man has to have resources and wealth in order to provide for several wives and their children.

In spite of the prominence that polygyny brings, there are also disadvantages. There is the routine jealousy that occurs between co-wives. Senior wives in this society have power, are often given distinguished privileges (Kuper 1947), and may allot work among the other co-wives. A senior wife may also divide all monetary rewards given to the wives by the husband. Also, the husband commonly consults the senior co-wife when he wants to marry an additional woman. Participating in

the selection of her husband's next wife is very beneficial: "... senior wives have the opportunity to maximize their economic benefits by selecting hard-working co-wives, and to limit intrafamily conflicts by choosing those junior co-wives they like" (Meekers and Franklin 1995:315). A man usually takes an additional wife if the senior co-wife is barren. The more co-wives in a family, the greater the difference in their ages; sometimes the youngest co-wife is the same age as the children of the senior co-wife. These wives bond and share labor and companionship; the presence of many wives indicates family prosperity.

Reproductive power among the Swazi women. Although women and children are regarded as assets, whether women are gainful depends on their fertility. When married, women keep their paternal clan name but may not issue it to their children (Kuper 1964). According to custom, the married man has preferred rights to his wives' sisters and his wives' brothers' daughters. In cases where a wife cannot have children, the woman's family must give back the cattle or else give a sister as a co-wife to have children for her. If a sister is accepted and taken by the man, additional cattle are not needed for payment. In the event that the husband dies, his widow or widows are taken by his brother through the custom of the levirate. In this way the wife can continue to give birth to children for the man's family. Women are very important to the Swazi for their reproductive capacity.

Summary of the power of Swazi women. Today polygyny is still allowed, but many Swazi men have only one wife. Only about one man in six has more than one wife, and a very small number of men have large harems. Christianity has played a major role in the decrease of polygyny, but Swazi high society men resist conversion.

The Swazi women have moderate economic power, great social power and limited reproductive power. The more food the women grow, the more power they have. They have more social power than women in some societies because bridewealth is involved, bringing prestige to the brides and their families. There are queens in this society, and senior wives have privileges, and women are important in forming alliances. In Swaziland women are also important because they bear the children; a man's greatest assets are his wives and his children.

Polygyny among the Mardudjara of Australia

The Mardudjara of Australia live in the Western Desert of the continent. They practice sororal polygyny. Here

the women have no economic power, but they do have social and reproductive power.

Polygyny among Australian aborigines has been opposed by religious missionaries since they stepped foot on the continent. However, the aborigines rely on a polygynous family structure to organize economic, religious, and social activities.

Economic power among the Mardudjara women. Mardudjara women possess no economic power. They do not live in their own house, have their own garden or grow their own food. Senior wives lack privileges

Social power among the Mardudjara women. Most common among the aborigines is the practice of sororal polygyny, in which a man marries two or more sisters and it is considered the best kind of polygynous union because sisters. "A marriage takes place when the parents of a man's betrothed send her to his camp and the couple then cohabits on a permanent basis—there is no marriage ceremony among the desert people" (Tonkinson 1978:80). Most of the time girls are married to men who are much older than they. A person acting as an intermediary will bring gifts to the girl's parents. Since the girl is usually much younger than her husband, she is not valued at first for her child bearing qualities, but for her skills in gathering food. Marriages among the Mardudjara do form alliances between groups.

Within the aboriginal society the position of a woman is much lower than that of a man. Men are said to punish their wives only if they neglect their household responsibilities, therefore; if a woman is punished by her husband, the rest of the community, men and women, will not sympathize. Abuse is tolerated. "Wife beating is often legitimized, in horticultural societies, but is less common or less extreme where the wife can rely upon the aid of her kin" (O'Kelly 1980:125). However, the extent to which a woman is beaten by her husband demonstrates how much power she has. If a woman is beaten frequently she has less power than a woman who is only beaten occasionally. In marriage, women have fewer rights, if any, compared to men. "A man who has committed some kind of serious offense may offer his wife or wives for intercourse with those he has wronged, as a gesture of atonement. His spouse should comply without complaint. Also, he may offer them as temporary partner to [guests] who are visiting, as a demonstration of hospitality and friendship. Again, the women concerned should raise no objections, whether or not they are consulted prior to the 'lending'" (Tonkinson 1978:82).

Reproductive power among the Mardudjara women. Most aboriginal communities pledged their daughters in

marriage a long time before the girls were physiologically mature. Girls were promised to men (Broome 1982) from as early as a few months of age. The age difference between a girl and her husband ranged from 20 to as many as 60 years. Sometimes women might even know the identity of their daughter's husband long before their daughter is born. This gives the mother of the unborn child reproductive power, because she can control who her unborn daughter's husband will be.

Summary of the power of Mardudjara women. Polygyny in Australia is disappearing. Today, polygyny involves twenty-five percent of all recorded aboriginal marriages; it was thought to have been much higher at one time. One reason for the decrease of polygyny is European influence; also, polygyny is financially disadvantageous. Another important factor is the decline in female economic importance. The degree of acculturation has much to do with the decline of polygyny, but traditional marriage customs still exist in remote locations.

The Mardudjara women of Australia have limited economic power, moderate social power and limited reproductive power.

Polygyny in Ecuador

The Achuar of Ecuador practice sororal polygyny. Here the women have limited economic, and moderate social and reproductive power. Achuar women have their own gardens and grow their own food. Their social power comes from the practice of sororal polygyny and alliance-forming potential of marriage. Women are highly valued for their reproductive powers..

Economic power among the Achuar women. The Achuar women possess limited economic power. The conventional settlement is made up of widely scattered households, each consisting of a single, usually polygynous, family (one man, multiple wives, and all their children) (Harner 1973) The household functions as a politically independent system of production and consumption. Although they do not have individual homes, each co-wife has her own cooking fire within the house for herself and her children, and also has her own platform bed. Children sleep with their mother on the platform, the cooking fire located at the foot of the bed. However, sometimes two polygynous families share the same house; if so, these women have even less economic power, because they do not have their own "space" within the home.

Achuar women have economic power because they are fortunate enough to have their own gardens, considered an important possession. Men clear the land (Harner 1973) and the women cultivate the crops, working very hard for their husbands: "Naturally enough, the head of the family wants his gardens to be as big as possible in order to have a plentiful supply of manioc beer on hand with which to entertain in style" (Descola 1994:152). Daughters and sometimes co-wives help with gardening chores. Besides working in their gardens and tending to their children, women make pots, weave cotton cloth, and make the precious manioc beer. "The subsistence productivity of the household closely correlates with the number of wives possessed by a man, because the women are responsible for more of the agricultural production. Thus, a satisfactory household production of food and the importance of manioc beer is dependent upon polygyny" (Harner 1973:80). With multiples wives there will be a surplus of food and beer so the men will be able to entertain visitors.

Social power among the Achuar women. More than fifty percent of Achuar marriages are with cross cousins, preferably sisters (Harner 1973), from either parent's side of the family: "The best way to have peace at home is to marry sisters; then the co-wives are bound by ties of true affection, which keeps them from competing for their husbands favors" (Descola 1994:308). Sororal wives usually share the same house.

Sororal polygyny enhances women's power. After marriage the new couple lives with the woman's family until she gives birth to their first child. After the birth the couple then moves to their own house, still relatively close to the woman's parents. When a man takes a bride, he takes on numerous obligations in relation to his new family. He has to clear the forest for his wife's garden and bring large logs to her fires as well as to her mother's fire. However, his heaviest obligations are to his father-in-law, whom the new husband has to support in warfare and in economic activities; in addition, the groom must demonstrate reverence in everyday interaction. In return for his commitment to his father-in-law, the groom hopes to take eventual possession of many or all of his daughters as wives (Harner 1973). There may, however, be more than one "new husband" living with his wife in her family home; these men are in competition for their wives' other sisters.

A woman is the link that binds male alliances between her father, brothers, and husband. Marriages are used to create military allies and bonds between families. Daughters, especially older daughters, have considerable choice in the marriage arrangements, and potential

grooms must impress both the girl and her family (Harner 1973).

Achuar husbands, however, are often brutal toward their wives, and the women have little power to prevent or change this situation. This compares to societies where husbands are only "occasionally" brutal to their wives, or only when the husbands think their wives "deserve it."

Reproductive power among the Achuar women. Two wives per husband is the preferred number among the Achuar, although men may at times have only one, and may have as many as three. An Achuar man likes one wife to accompany him while he is hunting while another stays home to tend to other household matters (Harner 1973). Harner writes, however, that "Men...believe that having more than one wife decreases, rather than increases, the likelihood of reproduction" (Harner 1973:82). Apparently this is because, if the men are off hunting (the more wives and children, the more food needed, the more hunting required), the frequency of sexual intercourse with the wife left behind decreases her chances for pregnancy. Even though men believe it is bad luck for the hunt, they usually can be persuaded to engage in sexual intercourse with the wife who accompanies him on the hunt. This may result in an imbalance of reproductive power between at-home wives and wives who accompany their husband on the hunt.

Men give gifts to the parents of a potential bride, and sometimes take these girls and raise them until they are old enough to marry. Sometimes a man will even ask a pregnant woman to reserve her unborn baby for him if it is a girl (Harner 1973). In this circumstance, the mother of the unborn girl has control of who her daughter will have for a husband.

Young wives have more reproductive power than older wives. Men sometimes demonstrate a preference for their newest wives. They give them presents at the expense of their other wives, creating resentfulness and anxiety. As competition erupts, co-wives seek revenge by excluding other women's children. Although most men understand the necessity of spending equal time with each of their wives and giving them equal amounts of meat and trade goods, some men do feel free to favor one wife and to ignore the others.

Summary of the power of Achuar women. The Achuar women have limited economic power, and moderate social and reproductive power.

Polygyny in Utah Among the Mormons

The Mormons (members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) demonstrate the power polygynous women had in the United States of America. The Mormons practiced polygyny during the nineteenth century (as part of their understanding of their religious beliefs), and as such represent another wealth-increasing polygynous society for comparison purposes. Today, the constitution of the state of Utah prohibits polygamy but there are some Mormons in Utah and Nevada still practicing polygyny outside of the church.

Mormon women had limited economic power, no social power, and limited reproductive power.

Mormon women were used by men to fulfill their religious obligations, and as such were valued as child bearers: "Abraham's concubines 'were given unto him' so that he could fulfill God's law [v.37]. Women have been given to Joseph Smith [founded of the Mormon Church], presumably so that he can be ruler over 'many things' [v. 53]" (Beecher 1987:47). Most men only had two wives, but the number was not restricted. Although the first wife's consent regarding additional wives was supposedly required by scripture, it "was not always sought or willingly given" (van Wagoner 1989:90).

Economic power among Mormon women. Only a few Mormon women, restricted to their domestic roles, possessed much economic power, in that they had their own houses. Some helped out by selling garden crops, quilts or baked goods. As the degree of polygyny increases women have more control over the products of their own labor, and become more powerful. "Thus, the greater the degree of polygyny, the more likely were women and children to function as independent economic units (cf. White 1988)" (Low 1990:52). In Mormon society, women were treated as property and not as people; men often abused their power in this patriarchal society.

Social power among Mormon women. Mormon women did not have social power. There were no queens in this society, bridewealth was not involved in marriages, and sororal polygyny was not commonly practiced. In Mormon society, men did not have the need to use women to form alliances; and differences in degrees of physical abuse were not significant.

Reproductive power among Mormon women. Motherhood was important among the Mormons, as men valued children and wanted big families. Women tended, however, to bond together for companionship and moral support, as their bonds with the men were relatively weak.

Summary of the power of Mormon women. In Utah, the Mormon women had limited economic power, no social power and limited reproductive power.

CONCLUSION

In Swaziland, a large female labor force of many wives who also tend to gardening and raising children encourages the practice of polygyny; this in turn promotes male status in this society. Swazi men are allowed to take "as many wives as they can handle." In Australia, polygyny is beginning to disappear, in part because of increasing acculturation. Christian missionaries have attempted to eliminate polygynous marriage practices, to the extent of even petitioning the government to prohibit it.

The Achuar society is a difficult one for women. Men are brutal and sometimes favor one wife in particular, causing children to suffer. Women's gardens are their sanctuaries, a place to reflect, deliver their babies and feel safe. In the US, a few still practice polygyny outside the Mormon Church, even though it has been illegal since the late 1800s.

Considering economic power, social power, and reproductive power, what conclusions can be drawn about these four polygynous societies? The Swazi and Achuar women have somewhat more "domestic sphere" power overall than do (did) the Mardudjara and American Mormon women. Economic and social powers vary slightly among these four societies. However, it seems to be the case that women's power is most often related to her reproductive value. Reproductive power is, many times, the most important power a woman can possess, but possession of this power may vary within a society, depending on a particular woman's situation, e.g., younger vs. older, at-home or on the hunt.

Only among the Swazi do women possess any kind of power in the highest degree, i.e., great social power. In every other case, the degree of power possessed by women in any of the categories was limited or moderate.

These findings indicate that the practice of wealth-increasing polygyny and sororal polygyny do not allow one to predict the type and degree of power possessed by the women in that society. More research pertaining to the power of women in the domestic realm would allow better predictions regarding the relative power of women in the different types of polygynous societies.

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