

Unveiling The Complex Relationship: Exploring The Connection Between Polygyny And Domestic Violence In India With Evidence From National Family Health Survey- 5

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Abstract

India saw the rise of domestic violence during the Covid period. However, domestic violence has been a long-existing historical nuisance for women in India and around the globe. One such practice which can be attributed towards the existing domestic violence scenario in India is polygyny. While polygyny is deeply rooted in certain religious and cultural beliefs, it has been scrutinised due to its potential association with domestic violence. Polygyny, although legally prohibited for most Indians under the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, continues to exist as a customary practice in specific communities. While the prevalence of polygyny in India is challenging to ascertain due to its clandestine nature, it is more commonly observed in rural areas and among economically disadvantaged populations. Several factors contribute to the perpetuation of polygyny, including patriarchal norms, economic considerations, and social pressures. The association between polygyny and domestic violence has been the subject of extensive research and debate worldwide. However, there is very little research in this area conducted in India.

This study aims to shed light on the complex relationship between polygyny and domestic violence in India, using multivariate and bivariate methods of secondary sources involving the evaluation of government reports and surveys. Also emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of the factors contributing towards this phenomenon. Finally, the study discusses the evaluation results sweeping aside any bias.

Keywords: Domestic violence, Polygyny, Indian laws, Women's laws, Patriarchy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Women are disproportionately affected by gender-based violence, which is a violation of universal human rights. "any act of violence that is directed against a person based on gender and results, or is likely to result, in physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty," as defined by the United Nations (1993). Intimate partner violence is the most common type of gender-based violence globally, and much research has provided insight into its incidence, patterns, causes, and effects (WHO, 2021a). Spousal and intimate partner violence are considered important manifestations of gender-based violence. Acts of violence frequently reinforces gender power dynamics within households, neighbourhoods, and regions. Acts of violence against women are used to establish and preserve male authority in patriarchal civilizations. (Wilcox, 2021; Wilcox, 2021a)

Physical, sexual, or psychological damage inflicted by an intimate partner is considered intimate relationship violence, according to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2019). Aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse, and forms of control fall under this category. Most women's experiences of domestic violence occur within the framework of an intimate relationship, as is generally acknowledged.

The World Health Organization (WHO) published several studies between 2013 and 2021b that link physical injuries, coerced or non-consensual sexual encounters, miscarriages, STDs, depression, and psychological distress among women to domestic violence. This is according to a recent study (Scotland et al., 2023) "Researchers have looked into many different variables to determine what causes domestic violence, and they have found that age at first marriage, the age difference between spouses, education level, wealth index, women's autonomy, place of residence, race/ethnicity, controlling behaviour of men, and alcohol consumption by men are all important predictors." For instance, recent research (Lasong et al., 2020; Seligson et al., 2022; Hasan et al., 2022; Whitehouse B., 2023) has shown that marital status is a significant predictor of domestic violence. The authors of this research narrow in on the Indian environment to investigate the link between polygamy and domestic violence.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Polygyny, in which a single man has numerous wives at once, is a deeply ingrained social phenomenon with religious and cultural roots in India. Despite polygyny's common perception as a matter of free will, certain studies have shown a correlation between the practice and domestic violence. Despite polygyny's

global prevalence, there is a dearth of research on the correlation between the practice and domestic violence in India. The primary goal of this literature analysis is to examine the existing scientific evidence between polygamy and domestic violence in Indian society. This review will go into the myriad of elements, dynamics, and results all linked to this correlation.

The practice of polygyny is not only detrimental, but it is an umbrella for various dangerous, degrading practices against women. As has been rightly highlighted by (Rahaman et al., 2022), polygyny commonly leads to various physical, sexual, and psychological harms which are inflicted upon women. Multiple studies have indicated that polygamy fosters inequality among co-wives, as husbands struggle to meet the needs of multiple spouses adequately. (Zeitzen & Koktvedgaard, 2020) Furthermore, women in polygynous marriages are at a higher risk of experiencing Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) when compared to their counterparts in monogamous unions, as mentioned in Dedieu et al., 2021. According to Dierickx et al., 2019 there has been enough literature evidence that connects polygyny with increased vulnerability to mental health complications, infertility and sexually transmitted diseases that women have to face, as also mentioned by Verma V, 2021; Hayes et al., 2023 suggest that a husband's ability to enter into additional marriages can be used as a means to exert control and abuse over his existing wife. According to Razak et al. (2020), this form of abuse can be perpetrated by the husband or co-wives. According to UNCHR (2002), the option for a husband to take on another wife can help avoid inherent conflicts within the marital relationship, such as disagreements over role division, sexual relations, and the distribution of resources, finances, and properties.

It is crucial to acknowledge that the association between polygyny and spousal violence is influenced by various characteristics of women, including their place of residence, caste, Religion, education, and wealth, as Hasan et al. (2023) noted. Recent studies by Moore (2022), Kisweka (2022), and Ahinkorah (2021), primarily focusing on the African context due to limited literature on the Indian context, have explored the link between polygyny and spousal violence. These studies reveal that instances of spousal violence are more prevalent in polygynous marriages when compared to monogamous ones.

Various studies have investigated the factors contributing to spousal violence in India, including research by Ram et al., 2019; Rao S 2020; Mondal et al., 2023. However, there is a notable absence of studies examining the relationship between polygyny and spousal violence within the Indian context. Therefore,

conducting a comprehensive study that explores the association between polygyny and spousal violence would be valuable. Such research would not only contribute to identifying factors contributing to spousal violence but also serve as a reference point for the government in formulating policies to prevent it.

III. METHODOLOGY

Statistical analysis of three waves of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) found polygyny uncommon in India. From 2005-2006 (1.9% of all marriages), 2015-2016 (1.6%), and 2019-2020 (1.4% of all marriages), polygamy has been on the decrease. It has been shown that poorer, less educated, rural, and older women in India are more likely to practice polygyny than their more privileged counterparts. Polygyny is more common in the North-Eastern part of India, less so in the Northern part of the country, and most common in the Southern part of the country, as reported by Sahoo et al., 2022.

Data from the fifth iteration of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) from 2019 to 2021 will be used for this study's secondary analysis. The NFHS is a large-scale study replicating the style of international Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) using a nationally representative, cross-sectional, demographic and health survey design. The poll used a two-stage stratified sampling technique to choose respondents. The probability proportional to size (PPS) approach was used to pick clusters in the first stage. The next step included a detailed household mapping and listing procedure within the selected clusters. The NFHS-5 national report provides a full explanation of the sample strategy and survey technique, allowing for a complete comprehension of both, according to a recent study (IIPS & ICF, 2021).

This study analyzed data from the NFHS-5 survey, which included responses from 512,408 married women. Polygynous marriages and their link to marital violence may be studied thanks to the availability of data on numerous co-wives. A particular question was asked of respondents to the NFHS-5 survey: "Besides you, does your husband have any other wives?" Women who reported that their husbands had no other spouses were classified as being in monogamous relationships. Conversely, polygynous marriages were defined as women reporting that their husbands had extra spouses. Using cross-tabulation, the study looked at whether or not polygyny is associated with an increased risk of domestic violence.

IV. RESULTS

The participants in this research were all married women between the ages of 15 and 49. The total sample size for the study of partner violence consisted of 58,699 married women after weighting. In India, between 2019 and 2021, 1.4% of all married women (N = 7,183) said their husbands had more than one partner.

58,699 women were chosen to participate in the domestic violence module; 57,757 were not in a polygynous relationship, while 942 were. The percentage of women who have suffered physical abuse by their husbands in India is 22.3%. Of them, 38.5% originated in polygynous unions and 22.1% in non-polygynous ones. As shown in Table 1(a), polygynous unions had almost double the incidence of physical violence as non-polygynous unions.

Table 1(a) – Correlation of percentage of presently married women experiencing Physical abuse.

Physical Abuse	Non-polygynous	Polygynous	Total
All types of physical aggression	22.1	38.5	22.3
Struck her with an open hand (a slap)	19.00	33.1	19.2
Forcefully shoved, shook, or hurled objects at her	9.3	21.5	9.5
Inflicted harm by twisting her arm or forcefully pulling her hair	7.8	16.8	7.9
Employed kicking, dragging, or physical assaults	6.1	13.4	6.2
Used fists or objects that could cause harm to punch her	5.8	15.3	5.9
Attempted to strangle or intentionally burn her	1.6	5.5	1.7
Made threats or assaulted her using weapons like a knife, gun, or other implements	0.8	3.9	0.9

Regarding sexual violence, 4.9% of women experienced it the previous year, as indicated in Table 1(b). The percentage of polygynous union members was 12.2%, whereas the percentage of non-polygynous union members was 4.8%. 10.1% of women in polygynous unions and 3.5% in non-polygynous unions reported experiencing sexual violence, with physical coercion to have sexual intercourse being the most common form of such abuse. It was also stated that women were threatened and coerced into sexual practices against their choice.

Table 1(b) – Correlation of percentage of presently married women experiencing Sexual abuse.

Sexual Abuse	Non-polygynous	Polygynous	Total
Any sexual violence	4.8	12.2	4.9

Coerced her into engaging in sexual intercourse with her husband against her will	3.5	10.1	3.6
Forced her through threats or other means to engage in sexual acts against her will	2.7	8.9	2.8
Compelled her to participate in sexual activities she did not consent to	1.8	3.8	1.9

According to the study, 11.6% of women reported experiencing emotional abuse. Interestingly, a higher proportion of emotional abuse was found in polygynous unions, reaching 27.8%, compared to non-polygynous unions, which had 11.3%. Emotional violence often involves humiliating women in front of others and insulting them to make them feel inferior about themselves. Notably, women in polygynous unions reported experiencing all three types of emotional violence more frequently than those in non-polygynous unions, as shown in Table 1(c).

Table 1(c) – Correlation of percentage of presently married women experiencing Emotional abuse.

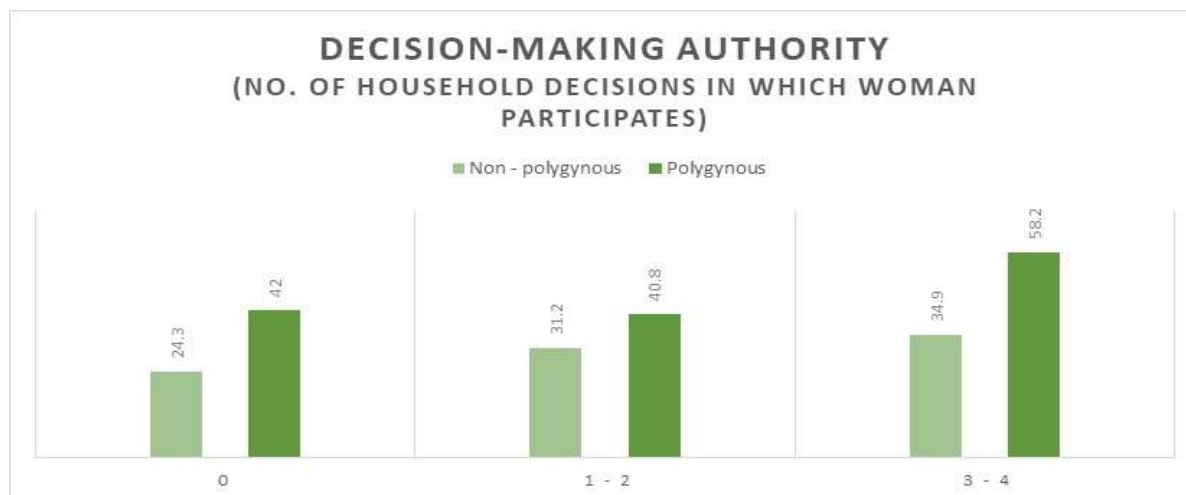
Emotional Abuse	Non-polygynous	Polygynous	Total
All types of emotional abuse	11.3	27.8	11.6
Engaged in actions to shame or humiliate her publicly	7.4	19.5	7.6
Issued threats to cause harm, either to her or someone she cares about	4.6	13.9	4.8
Verbally demeaned or belittled her, causing her to feel poorly about herself	6.7	18.7	6.9

Women in polygynous marriages were more likely to report suffering physical, sexual, or emotional violence than those in non-polygynous unions.

Whether women were in polygynous or monogamous marriages, the research found a clear negative link between women's participation in family decision-making and violence towards them. Women's access to decision-making or empowerment greatly impacted the rate of violence against them. When women had no say in family decisions, the rate of marital violence was 42.0% higher in polygynous partnerships. In contrast, as seen in Chart 1, the rates of violence decreased dramatically when women had an active role in making choices within the home, dropping to 58.2% in polygynous unions and 34.9% in non-polygynous unions. These results align with other research showing a correlation between women's access to decision-making roles and a lower incidence of domestic violence in Myanmar (Tun et al., 2020) and Pakistan (Akram, 2021). Similarly, Sunmola et al. (2021) found that

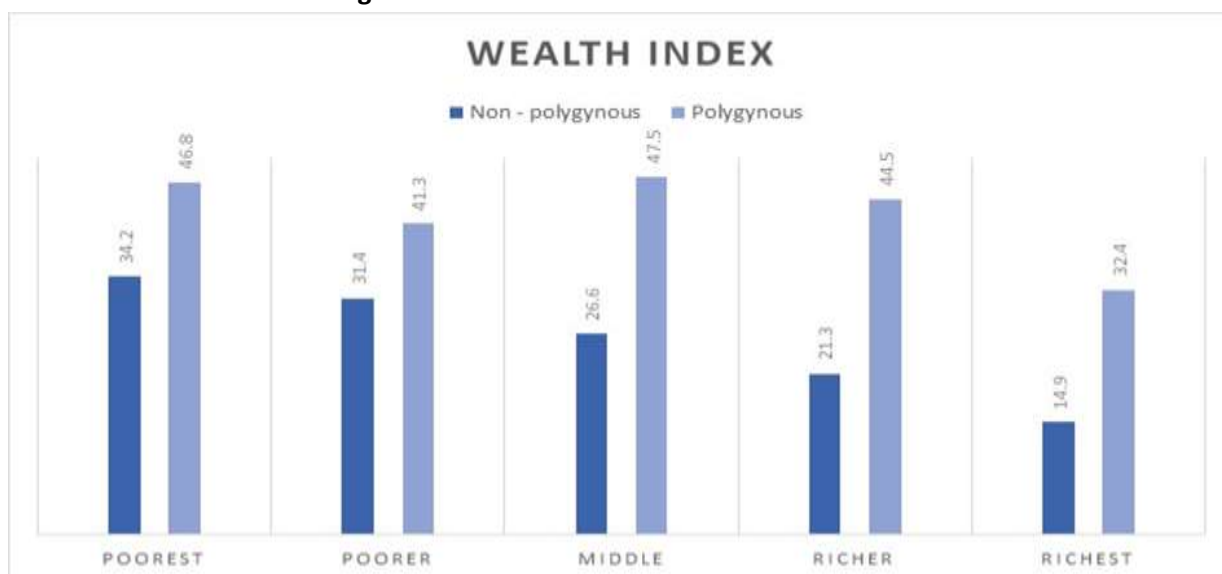
women with equal decision-making power with their partners had a decreased likelihood of experiencing domestic violence.

Chart 1- Proportion of married women who faced spousal violence in the last 12 months, categorized by household decision-making traits and polygyny status, between 2019 and 2021



This study further emphasizes that as income improves, the prevalence of polygamy decreases. In India, among the poorest households, the rate of polygamy was recorded at 2.4 per cent, whereas among the wealthiest households, it significantly dropped to only 0.5 per cent. (Chart 2)

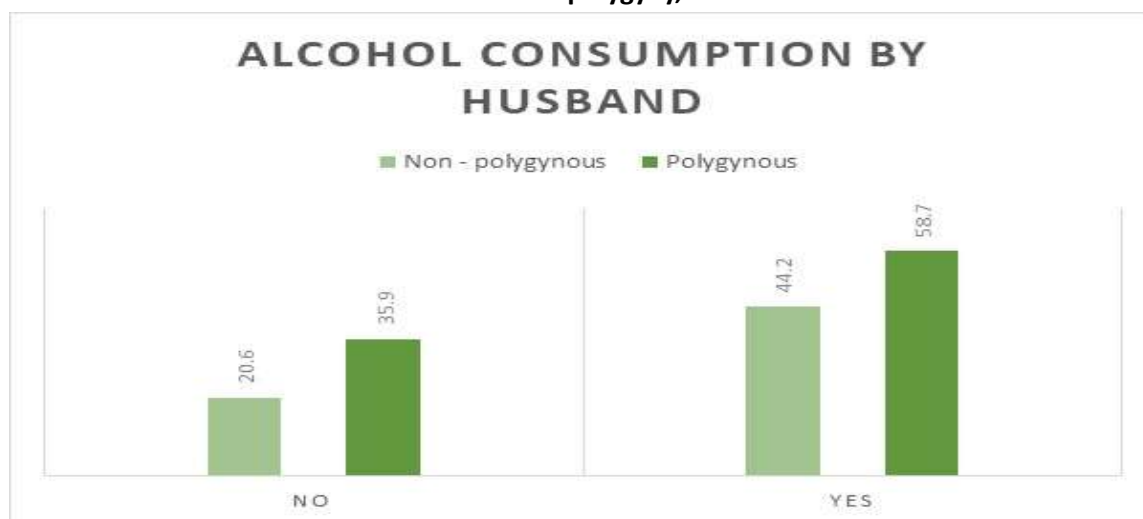
Chart 2- Percentage of currently married women who encountered domestic violence within the last year, analyzed based on wealth status and the presence of polygynous marriages from 2019 to 2021.



Almost one-third of women in polygamous relationships approve of assaulting a spouse without provocation. Most polygynous

wives (58.7%) and almost half non-polygynous wives (44.2%) said they had experienced physical abuse at the hands of their alcoholic husbands. In polygynous and non-polygynous partnerships, husband alcohol use was associated with higher rates of spousal violence across all categories (Chart 3).

Chart 3- Proportion of married women who faced spousal violence in the last 12 months, categorized by husband's alcohol habits with that of polygyny, between 2019 and 2021



V. DISCUSSION

Women in polygynous marriages are more likely to suffer domestic violence than women in non-polygynous marriages, which is a significant problem in India. According to the results, between 2019 and 2021, almost one-fifth of women in non-polygynous marriages and nearly two-fifths in polygynous marriages experienced marital abuse.

While previous research has shown that women in polygynous unions are more likely to experience spousal violence than their monogamous counterparts, this study shows that this association also holds in India, despite polygyny being less common in India than in Africa.

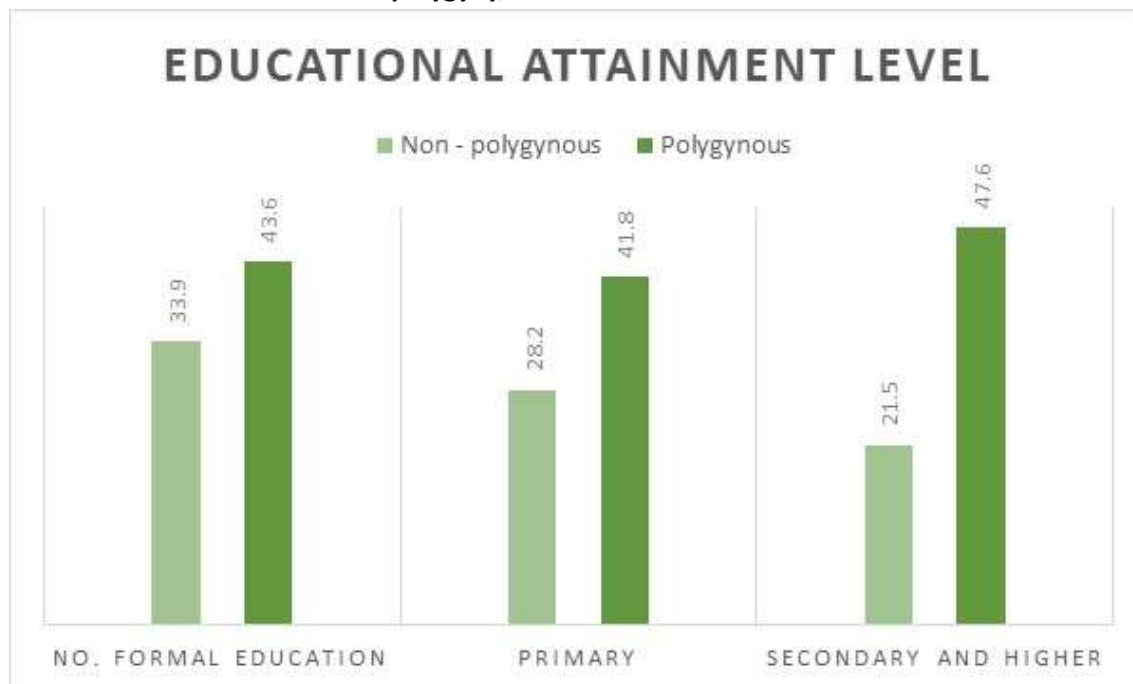
Ogunwale et al. (2020) reviewed previous studies on polygyny and found that, in some cases, men raped their wives by forcing them to engage in sexual acts against their will. There was also a correlation between being in a polygynous relationship and experiencing emotional abuse. When a husband provided his whole attention to only one of his wives, the other women typically resented him and became hostile. Adewale et al. (2021) found that some spouses used emotional abuse against their wives to resolve marital disputes.

The lack of female education is not the only cause of polygyny. Because of how deeply embedded it is in the local

socioeconomic system, it usually requires both ideological and economic shifts to be eradicated or significantly altered. It is not enough to empower women; the underlying causes contributing to male control over reproductive rights must also be addressed. The progress toward female freedom will be stunted once these underlying reasons are addressed. Promoting gender equality requires measures such as polygynous household systems attack Patriarchy at its roots. (Chart 4)

Women who enter into marriage before age 18 are less likely to experience violence than those who enter into marriage later (Ahinkorah, 2022). Furthermore, women in polygynous marriages are more likely to experience violence than those in non-polygynous partnerships, regardless of the age at which the marriage occurs. These results corroborate other studies showing a strong correlation between educational inequality and domestic violence.

Chart 4 - Proportion of married women who faced spousal violence in the last 12 months, categorized by Education level with that of polygyny, between 2019 and 2021

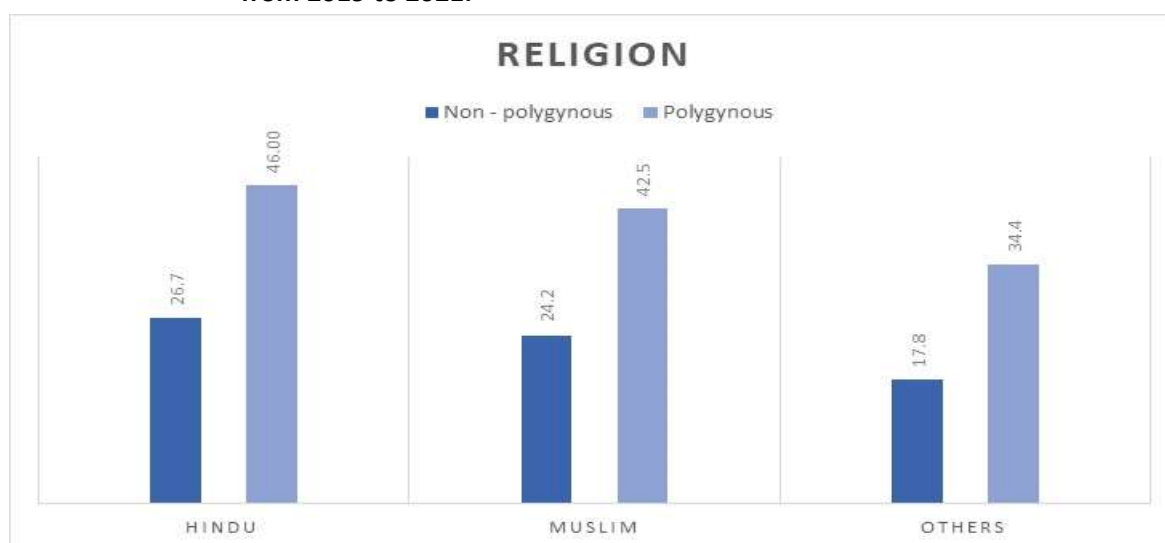


Additionally, the research discovered that women with two or more children were more likely to be victims of marital abuse in polygynous relationships than in non-polygynous unions. Previous studies (Ler et al., 2020; Pathak et al., 2023) found a correlation between having more kids and experiencing domestic abuse.

Muslim personal law in India allows males to have several wives (up to four in some instances). However, statistics show that this is not a very common occurrence among Indian Muslims. During

2019-21, only 1.9% of Muslim women and 1.3% of Hindu women were in polygynous marriages, according to data from the National Family Health Survey-5. Although there are fewer Muslim women overall, there may be more Hindu women in polyamorous relationships than Muslim women. Hindu women have a higher polyamory rate than Muslim women in certain places. **(Chart 5)**

Chart 5- Percentage of currently married women who encountered domestic violence within the last year, analyzed based on Religion and the presence of polygynous marriages from 2019 to 2021.



Three per cent of Hindu women and two and a half per cent of Muslim women in Telangana were found to be in polygynous marriages. Chhattisgarh, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh all showed very similar trends. The percentage of women who said their husbands had several wives was most significant in Meghalaya (6.1%). The rates of polygamy in Mizoram (4.1%) and Sikkim (3.9%), two states with large indigenous populations, were among the highest in the world.

Arunachal Pradesh has the highest polygamy rate at 3.7%, followed by Telangana at 2.9% and Assam, Karnataka, and Puducherry at 2.4%. Women in Goa reported the lowest polygamy rates in India (0.2% said their husbands had numerous wives). From 0.3% to 0.6%, many states recorded rates; they included Haryana, Jammu and Kashmir, Gujarat, Punjab, Rajasthan, Delhi, and Himachal Pradesh.

In addition, this study pinpointed 40 municipalities where polygamy is most common. In a recent poll, nearly one in five women said they were part of a polygynous marriage; this prevalence was most significant in the East Jaintia Hills area of Meghalaya. Kra Daadi district in Arunachal Pradesh has the highest polygamy rate (16.4%), followed by West Jaintia Hills in

Meghalaya (14.5%). In addition, Meghalaya's West Khasi Hills and Arunachal Pradesh's East Kameng also registered double-digit growth rates.

The practice of polygyny raises profound questions about societal dynamics. In cultures where polygyny is prevalent, and men exercise control over women and their reproductive choices, violence is higher within these societies and beyond. Such cultures often leave many young, lower-class men without sexual partners, leading to an increased likelihood of violence. Additionally, men in these societies benefit from their control over women, which grants them wealth and status as they wield authority over a scarce resource—women. Women's passivity becomes fundamental to sustaining elaborate cultural hierarchies built upon male dominance.

In regions where female emancipation is encouraged, and traditional passive roles for women are challenged with the rise of independent women, men may feel threatened and angered. This reaction arises from the realization that their power derives from controlling and dominating women's productive and reproductive capacities, which is a significant source of their power within these societies.

The research also confirmed what has been found elsewhere in Sub-Saharan Africa (Darteh et al., 2021): polygynous partnerships are more likely to justify wife-beating than monogamous ones. Similar to what has been shown in previous studies, this one found a correlation between husbands' controlling behaviour and marital violence, with more excellent rates in polygynous unions than in non-polygynous ones. In addition, the research confirmed studies from India (Jungari et al., 2022) that found a correlation between husbands' alcohol use and domestic violence against women. The study also highlighted that polygynous marriages are more likely to include violence against women with alcoholic spouses than non-polygynous unions. These results highlight the many interrelated causes of domestic violence across cultures.

VI. CONCLUSION

Domestic violence against women in India is a major problem that has to be addressed. Several significant variables have been identified in this research that are linked to different types of domestic violence. India and other South Asian nations have a disproportionately high rate of intimate partner violence compared to the rest of the world. The data demonstrates that polygyny increases married women's risk of intimate partner violence. Many different elements at the individual and family levels contribute to this issue. Despite a greater risk of domestic

violence in polygynous partnerships compared to monogamous ones, the research highlights the need for a united national strategy to address violence against women in India, considering the vast range of socioeconomic conditions and geographic locations across the country.

Whether or whether the couples are polygynous, the data highlights the critical need for a holistic and proactive strategy to economically empower women and promote social conditions that reject controlling behaviour and domestic abuse. We may make substantial headway in resolving this critical problem if we challenge attitudes that reinforce women's susceptibility to violence throughout society.

Researchers concluded that educated women who come from financially stable homes are less likely to experience domestic abuse. On the other hand, characteristics including women's and men's alcohol use, a history of family violence, child marriage, having more children, and being married for a more extended period were all linked to an elevated risk of intimate partner violence.

Another important takeaway from the research is the need for stricter enforcement of laws that make it illegal for males to have many wives at once. Polygynous partnerships might put women in danger of abuse from their husbands if the rules regulating marriage are not strictly enforced. India has taken a significant step toward eliminating domestic abuse with the passage of the Protection of Women from Domestic Abuse Act in 2005. Financial independence via education is critical in helping women leave abusive relationships. Women who may not have access to formal education should be the focus of public education programs spread via media outlets. For these programs to successfully change people's mindsets about domestic abuse, they must include males.

It is essential to enforce regulations that allow victims to take legal action against their abusers, paying particular attention to the most economically and socially disadvantaged women. Policymakers and other stakeholders need to take preventative action to address the problem of domestic abuse and protect women. Strict legislation enforcement prohibiting males from marrying more than one woman at a time in India (except one religious minority group) is needed to safeguard women from domestic abuse in polygynous marriages.

In sum, the data presented here sheds new light on the complex dynamics between polygynous marriage and domestic violence in India. To protect women from abuse inside polygynous marriages, the research highlights the significance of adequate legal measures, education, and shifting cultural norms.

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