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DOI

[10.4324/9781003470786-12](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003470786-12)

Publication date

2025

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Relationships Rights and Legal Pluralism

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Citation for published version (APA):

Vroon-Najem, V., & Moors, A. (2025). Contestations about polygyny: Converts to Islam in the Netherlands. In M. Stępień, & A. Juzaszek (Eds.), *Relationships Rights and Legal Pluralism: The Inadequacy of Marriage Laws in Europe* (pp. 143-156). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003470786-12>

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8 Contestations about polygyny

Converts to Islam in the Netherlands

Vanessa Vroon-Najem and Annelies Moors

8.1 Introduction

On 6 October 2016, a Dutch TV programme, *Undercover in the Netherlands*, broadcasted an episode that showed how ‘illegal Islamic marriages’ are concluded in Dutch mosques. This episode of *Undercover*, a rather sensationalist commercial format with reporters going undercover to report on ‘serious abuse’, was one step in a sequence of events that would lead to major media hype, parliamentary questions and a law proposal.¹ References in this episode to polygyny certainly contributed to the hype.

The day before the airing of this episode, the largest right-wing liberal party (VVD) presented an initiative to further criminalise religious marriages that are concluded prior to a civil marriage.² This initiative started with the firm statement that ‘the Dutch marriage law does not discriminate: in the Netherlands, as a woman or man you are free to arrange your love life the way you want, regardless of descent or religion’. It then continued with the phrase, ‘in the Netherlands you decide yourself whom to fall in love with, whom to sleep with and whether or not to marry, and if so, with whom, and in which order you choose to do so’. Central to this initiative is the premise that ‘undermining Dutch marriage law is not just a violation of the law’, but also a ‘rejection of the equality between men and women, the Dutch way of life and the history of emancipation that Dutch marriage law has gone through’.

According to the Dutch Civil Code, ‘religious functionaries’ are legally prohibited from concluding a religious marriage prior to a civil marriage (Dutch Civil Code 1992, Art. 68; Van der Leun and Leupen 2009, 8ff).³ The initiative proposes and argues for an intensified enforcement of the existing rule, for example ‘through undercover actions’ on ‘religious (often Islamic) dating

1 This chapter builds on Moors, de Koning, and Vroon-Najem 2018, where this TV episode is analysed extensively.

2 See Dutch Parliamentary Document (2019).

3 This regulation emerged in the early nineteenth-century Napoleonic period, when marriage became only a civil matter. In Belgium and France, concluding a religious marriage prior to a civil marriage is also prohibited.

sites', and to extend the law and make everyone who is directly and voluntarily involved in concluding an illegal (religious) marriage punishable by law.⁴

This initiative was written with the support of Shirin Musa, the director of Femmes for Freedom (FFF), an organisation that promotes marital freedom and the equality of men and women and fights against forced marriages, child marriages, forced abandonment, hidden women and marital captivity.⁵ The text of the initiative includes two cases that Musa presented to substantiate the policy proposals. One of these cases concerns an illegal immigrant who finds a third wife through a dating site.⁶ The *Undercover* episode presents precisely such a case: an actor impersonating a Muslim woman goes online to find a polygynous husband on a Muslim dating site. After meeting a man already married to two wives, the couple goes to the mosque to conclude the marriage. When they leave the mosque, the *Undercover* reporter confronts both the newlywed husband and the imam who concluded the marriage.

What is striking in the initiative, the cases Musa provided and the *Undercover* episode is that polygynous marriages are mobilised in order to make the case against religious-only marriages, the large majority of which are monogamous. Foregrounding polygynous marriages is a convenient way to support the notion that Islamic-only marriages are harmful for women. This, in turn, is then used as the main argument to further criminalise such religious-only marriages, although these marriages have no legal effect.

In this chapter, we first briefly discuss the problematisation of polygynous marriages in policy-making and the media and then shift the focus to the narratives of women who have entered such marriages. Our interlocutors are converts to Islam, to whom polygyny is an alien practice. Because of their thorough unfamiliarity with polygyny, they need to reflect seriously on how they entered such a marriage.⁷ Through these women's reflexive narratives we can gain insight into how they signify and engage in a polygynous marital relationship.

Our interlocutors are not statistically representative for converts to Islam in the Netherlands. They all self-identify as observant Muslims, to whom living a

4 The initiative then presents five policy proposals, two of which directly concern entering a religious-only marriage. In the meantime the proposal has been amended; the criminalisation of witnesses has been removed (otherwise the state would need to define who is a witness, which goes against the separation of state and religion) as well as that of the parties entering such a marriage (avoiding the risk of further victimising the victim) (see Dutch Parliamentary Document (2020). Also, Femmes for Freedom has distanced itself from the criminalisation of spouses (2021).

5 See www.femmesforfreedom.com/.

6 The second case concerns the proposals on support for women who are left in their country of origin; a polygynous marriage is also at stake in this case.

7 Yet there are no firm lines of demarcation between these converts and Muslim-born women in the Netherlands, who are often the children of migrants. Also for the latter, 'polygyny' is often far removed from their life worlds. Some of these women may also have grown up with little Islamic education; they may go through a process that in some ways resembles the conversion of our interlocutors.

Muslim life matters a great deal. Whereas they do not commit to a particular school of Islamic thought, they have, to various extents, been inspired by the Islamic revival. This means that they follow a relatively literalist interpretation of the main sources of Islam, attempt to follow ‘correct or pure Islam’ and distance themselves from ‘traditional cultural aspects’.⁸

This contribution is part of our long-term research with women converts to Islam in the Netherlands. Starting in 2014, Moors and Vroon-Najem worked together to explore how these women entered marriage (Moors, de Koning, and Vroon-Najem 2018; Moors and Vroon-Najem 2019).⁹ For our project we conducted topical life story interviews, centring on how they found a spouse and entered marriage (Bertaux 1981), with 40 women converts (mostly between 2015 and 2019); we talked extensively with 10 women who had personal experience with polygyny and three women who would seriously consider such a marriage. As we purposely looked for women in a polygynous relationship, it is not possible to draw conclusions from these numbers about the prevalence of polygyny amongst converts, which remains very limited. Additionally, we asked dozens of other converts how they felt about polygyny and whether they would consider entering such a marriage themselves. Our fieldwork included participant observation at the conclusion of marriage contracts and weddings, attending lectures and courses on how to enter a Muslim marriage and many informal conversations with the various parties involved in these marriages. We also interviewed religious authority figures, both converts and born Muslims, to whom converts often turned for advice. Both authors have been involved in conceptualising the project, have done fieldwork that included joint interviews with our interlocutors and have worked together in analysing the material.

The introductory vignette already indicates that polygynous marriages are both legally prohibited and considered undesirable, if not reprehensible. In the following we first discuss how polygynous marriages have been turned into a problem in need of intervention (Bacchi 2015). As will be argued, the ways in which these marriages intersect with migrant/transnational marriages and with Islamic-only marriages has been an intricate part of this.

8.2 The problem with polygyny: State actors

In the Netherlands polygynous marriages are prohibited.¹⁰ Historically, civil marriages, institutionalised in the early nineteenth century, have been

8 We have not included women who converted only for pragmatic reasons.

9 Research for this project is funded by the ERC advanced grant on ‘Problematizing “Muslim Marriages”: Ambiguities and Contestations’ (Grant number: 2013-AdG-324180). Vroon-Najem started research on women’s conversion to Islam in the Netherlands and the politics of belonging in 2006 (Vroon-Najem 2014, 2019), while Moors has a long history of research on Muslim marriage and particularly the dower (Moors 1995, 2008).

10 When a registered partnership became an option in 1998 the same rule applied; it is, however, possible to include more people in a cohabitation contract.

modelled after Christian marriages; that is, they were to be monogamous, heterosexual and concluded with the consent of the spouses without any possibility for divorce; women were obliged to obey their husbands. Whereas over time, the prohibition of divorce and the obedience rule were abolished, and same-sex marriages have been permitted since 2001, polygynous marriages have remained prohibited. Still, polygynous marriages that were concluded abroad (and were valid) could be recognised in the Netherlands, following the principles of International Private Law. This, however, did not apply to the effects of these marriages. For instance, men were allowed to bring only one spouse and her children to join them in the Netherlands.

In the 1990s the need for stricter rules became a topic of debate. By then, Islam had been labelled as standing in tense relation with Dutch culture and as the source of many societal problems.¹¹ From the 2000s on, there was a further growth of ethno-nationalism with public debate and policy becoming increasingly assimilationist as a result (Gingrich 2006; Geschiere 2009). With respect to polygyny, in 1993 the Dutch Supreme Court declared that the principle of monogamy is a principle of public order. This opened the door for refusing to recognise polygynous marriages in the Netherlands concluded abroad. In 2015, after years of debates about countering forced marriages, further restrictions were imposed. Polygynous marriages were mentioned in one breath with forced marriages; they were considered an indication of unfree partner choice (Bonjour and De Hart 2013, 70). Polygynous marriages concluded abroad were no longer recognised if one of the partners had the Dutch nationality or had the Netherlands as their main residence (Rutten 2016, 50). The main argument was that polygynous marriages are considered harmful for women.¹²

Besides the legal prohibition of polygyny, the women involved face two other ways in which these marriages are problematised. First, some of the marriages of women converts to Islam in the Netherlands are transnational as these women often marry a (post-)migrant from a Muslim majority country. Secondly, as observant Muslims, who do not want to enter a sexual relationship outside of a marriage, they often enter an Islamic marriage quite quickly. However, an Islamic-only marriage (without a prior civil marriage) is prohibited.

To start with migrant marriages, during colonial times the Dutch state was already concerned about 'native' men marrying Dutch women. Such marriages were often considered a shortcut to acquire Dutch nationality (Stoler 1992, 543).¹³ Similar concerns about migrant marriages became salient again with the growing presence of labour migrants in the Netherlands in the 1970s;

11 Simultaneously, migrants from Muslim majority countries had become identified (and sometimes self-identified) as Muslims.

12 There is also a strong societal condemnation of those entering such marriages, which stands in contrast to the more nuanced way in which polyamory is evaluated (Roodsaz 2023).

13 More generally, until 1964, a woman who married a foreigner automatically lost her citizenship, while a foreign woman who married a Dutch man automatically became Dutch (De Hart 2006, 11).

such marriages were often deemed harmful for the women concerned. At first the focus was on the negative effects for Dutch women, but in the next decades such concerns were also extended to the daughters of migrants in the Netherlands who married a man from their parents' country of origin and to the women who were brought as so-called 'import brides' from Türkiye and Morocco to the Netherlands; in both cases the women were considered at risk of forced marriages (Bonjour and De Hart 2013, 67–68).

Undesirable migrant marriages were then regularly linked to 'Islam'. Polygynous marriages, cousin marriages and underage marriages were associated with Muslims and considered particularly negative for women. As an indication of unfree partner choice (forced marriage), policymakers developed a wide range of new regulations to counter them (Bonjour and Kraler 2014; Sterckx and Dagevos 2014; De Koning, Storms, and Bartels 2014).

Whereas these debates all centred on civil marriages, from the mid-2000s Islamic-only marriages also became a topic of debate (Moors 2013). The first hype emerged in 2005 when, in the context of the trial of the Hofstad network (an alleged terrorist organisation), it was reported that such Islamic marriages were concluded in these circles, often in a highly informal manner.¹⁴ In 2008, Islamic marriages again became the focus of considerable public and parliamentary debate. This time, imams attached to Salafi-oriented mosques were accused of concluding such marriages, which might also be underage or polygynous marriages. They were seen as a way of developing a highly conservative 'parallel society' that self-segregated from Dutch society. In both cases – be they marriages in jihadi circles or those linked to Salafi-oriented mosques – the women entering these marriages were considered victims of the men involved.

8.3 Women converts and polygyny

Not only state actors but also scholars often argue that polygynous marriages are harmful for women. Liversage (2019), who did research on polygyny in transnational marriages, argues that in such marriages most of the advantages are for men and most of the hardship for women. While agreeing that in some cases women themselves may see advantages, they were not present in her study.¹⁵ Also Joffe (2016) and Zeitzen (2008) focus in their work on equality and harm. Zeitzen acknowledges that whereas different marriage forms (both polyandry and polygyny) may exist in the same communities; in both cases they tend towards male domination. This then raises the question how the women who enter polygynous marriages signify these.

14 The Dutch security services considered such Islamic marriages as a threat to national security (NCTb 2006).

15 Liversage (2019) explains that this may be explained at least in part by the fact that the larger study from which she drew her cases focused on divorce.

For Muslims, marriage is important religiously; especially for converts, it is also important for social reasons. Quite often these women desire to enter marriage quickly: to keep sexual relations *halal*, to have companionship and to be able to start a Muslim family of their own. Since becoming Muslim is controversial among non-Muslims in the Netherlands and joining a local community of Muslims takes time, many women converts are between social circles for a while and may struggle with loneliness, particularly during Ramadan and Islamic holidays (Vroon-Najem 2014).

Lacking Muslim family and being unfamiliar with the stricter forms of Muslim dating, finding a husband is often a challenge. This makes women vulnerable to abuse, particularly since new converts tend to have an idealistic, rosy view of other Muslims (e.g. Roald 2012). This desire to find a spouse quickly without much knowledge or support can therefore have some serious downsides. In hindsight, our interlocutors often realised that they had been naïve and lacking knowledge about what an Islamic marriage entails (see also Moors and Vroon-Najem 2023). For single converts, being on their own makes it particularly difficult to assess and vet potential marriage partners. Online and offline, more experienced (convert) women warn each other about so-called ‘marriage bandits’:¹⁶ men who present themselves as devout Muslims but who are in fact only pursuing quick sexual relationships. One of the red flags is when such a man proposes a convert to become his ‘secret second wife’.¹⁷

Our interlocutors generally acknowledged that polygyny is allowed in Islam, but most did not consider it something they would choose for themselves. Many expressed ambivalence; they would not reject polygyny outright and mentioned some possible benefits, but the thought of sharing their husband remained quite unappealing or even a non-negotiable no-go. Nevertheless, many of them followed the opinion that a woman could not *prohibit* her husband outright from marrying more than one woman, but it was certainly named as a reason for divorce. Often, they underlined that whether polygyny is acceptable depends on whether a husband would be able to live a *righteous* polygynous life. They pointed out that such a man would need to be able to live up to his obligations: equal treatment of both wives in material and emotional terms. This is very difficult in the Netherlands, as marital life is legally and practically based on the model of one spouse only.

16 This term was coined by Zainab Bint Younes, a Canadian Muslim writer and blogger: see MuslimMatters.org, which publishes material about polygyny.

17 To avoid the ‘marriage bandit’, women are advised to find a trustworthy *wali*, a Muslim man who can act as a marriage guardian on their behalf; to educate themselves regarding the rights and duties entailed in a Muslim marriage; and to pursue a civil marriage as well since in the Netherlands a Muslim marriage is a private ritual without legal standing. However, in the case of polygyny, a civil marriage is unobtainable. This leaves women converts who choose this form of marriage with fewer options for legal protection than would be the case if a civil marriage with more than one person were allowed.

8.4 Age and positionality

A woman convert's assessment of polygyny varies depending on her age and positionality, which ties in with her options to find a marital partner. This becomes more difficult as women become older, have been married previously and already have children. Although a few of our interlocutors entered a polygynous marriage at a young age, it was mostly something to be considered by older women or women who had been married before.

Older women converts particularly mentioned that their perspective on the subject had changed over the years as they became more open to the possibility of being a second wife, or at least they could name some advantages. The difference in positionality between younger and older women was clearly visible in the life story of Aliya,¹⁸ a divorced single woman in her forties at the time of our interview, whose assessment of polygyny had changed over the years. When she first married, she was in her twenties. At that time, she had demanded a stipulation in her Islamic marriage contract that her husband could not marry a second wife, something she considered 'the worst of the worst'.

The option to prohibit a husband from marrying a second wife through a stipulation in the Islamic marriage contract is subject of debate (in practice, the effect of such a stipulation is that a divorce is granted to the wife). Those advocating against such a stipulation argue that it is not possible to prohibit something that Allah has allowed. Aliya, however, considered it permissible:

I know many scholars of Islam disagree but in Islam it is permitted to make a contract, and a marriage contract is a contract like any other. You are equal partners in that. So you can draw up rules, and if you both sign, that is valid. Many people say, 'Allah has allowed it so how can you ban it?' But then I think, Allah has allowed us to eat Brussels sprouts every day but that does not mean it is mandatory. If I put in my contract that I do not eat Brussels sprouts, that does not mean I do something forbidden, right? You cannot make something that Allah has allowed mandatory for everyone. Although I have to say, this is my own interpretation.¹⁹

When her future husband hesitated to agree with this condition, she almost cancelled the marriage.

In hindsight, she admits that at the time she had a very romantic image of marriage.

Now, at age 46 [and single], my thinking is more like 'maybe it is not such a bad idea, polygyny'. Now I look at it from a different perspective. . . .

18 In order to protect the privacy of our interlocutors, we have used pseudonyms.

19 She also mentioned that some would argue that a man is not bound to abide by such a provision in the contract because within Islam polygyny is allowed, but she rejected this as well: 'that I would consider fraud; you have signed [a contract]'.

I can see wisdom in that it is allowed because there are many women who are left [without husbands] and especially good men who treat women well, those men remain married, you know. Rationally, now I have a different perspective, because when you are young, the only thing on your mind is ‘he is mine, he is mine’, but there is more to it [marriage] than that.

This sentiment was echoed by another interlocutor, Adinda. Like Aliya, she lectured occasionally for local (converted) Muslim women’s groups. Adinda told us polygyny was not an issue in her own marriage; her husband did not desire to marry another woman. But she shared a moral story that circulated among the women in her social circle.

The story highlights the positive sides of polygyny and encourages women not to reject the thought out of hand. In this story, a husband tells his spouse that he desires to marry a second wife. He asks for her approval, but she answers that if he does so, she will leave him. He then abandons the idea as they have children together, and he decides it is not worth it. But then he suddenly dies, and the life of his widow is turned upside down. She is suddenly a single mother who needs to take care of her children by herself while depending financially on a business in peril. As the story goes, she becomes depressed and destitute. Then a friend tells her that she knows a brother [in Islam] who is interested in marrying a second wife: would she be interested to meet him? Now this woman is on the other side of the table and agrees to meet him. They like each other, and she asks to meet his first wife. At this meeting, his first wife admits she finds it very difficult and painful but nevertheless, she has hope that they can be like sisters. This act of sisterhood invokes in the woman at the centre of the story a positive form of jealousy as she realises ‘she is the woman I could not be’.

Appreciating the shift in perspective in this story, Adinda explained why polygyny means letting go of your ego and being generous enough to accept sharing your husband, highlighting why polygyny is allowed in the first place: to save people (from loneliness and destitution). However, she added, we are now all very selfish, we are all like, ‘he is *my* husband, he is mine!’ In the life stories of our interlocutors who experienced being in a polygynous marriage, indeed, the ideal picture of Islamic sisterhood, wishing for the other woman what they wish for themselves, was challenging in regard to sharing their husband.

8.5 Second wives: openness or secrecy

Almost all the women we interviewed about polygyny highlighted the importance of openness and honesty. They highly valued the first wife being informed of a pending second marriage and the second wife being made aware that a potential husband is already married.

Several of our interlocutors experienced grief and heartbreak caused by secrecy. Initially feeling positive about polygyny, they found themselves caught

up in considerable personal drama. Two of them started from a similar position of aiming for Islamic sisterhood as expressed in Adinda's moral story. One of them is Dagmar. Being her husband's first wife she felt that she could deal with her husband's wish to have a second wife and agreed to it being a possibility when they discussed it in general. However, when she found out, after the fact, that he had indeed gone ahead and married another woman, she felt terrible. It bothered her greatly that he had not consulted her beforehand. After two and a half years, she finally met his second wife herself. But despite her efforts to build an understanding, sending the second wife a 'welcome aboard' package, a relationship built on the concept of Islamic sisterhood never materialised. When this second marriage ended in a divorce, she made her husband promise that if he would ever consider marrying again, he would consult her beforehand and would make sure there were clear arrangements between both women to ensure equity.

Sakina experienced the precariousness of secrecy from the other end, being the secret second wife herself. She entered marriage as her husband's second wife with an idealistic vision of polygyny.

I entered into that marriage thinking, 'nice, we will help and support each other with raising our children. If she is busy I will care for them and vice versa. We will learn from each other.' That is how I envisioned it.

In practice, her marriage remained a secret as her new husband failed to inform his first wife; he had convinced Sakina that it was for the best and that, in any event, the secrecy would only be temporary. However, before he took the step to tell his first wife, she found out on her own. As they were in a civil marriage, she threatened him with a costly divorce and the loss of custody of their children. He then radically distanced himself from Sakina and (Islamically) divorced her immediately. Although this caused her much anger and pain, after some time had passed, she nevertheless entered a polygynous marriage for a second time. This time, she made sure their marriage was out in the open from the beginning, and although she was on good terms with her husband's first wife, she no longer envisioned a shared life as 'sisters in Islam', as she had experienced the dilemmas and challenges of putting such ideals into practice.

In the stories of two much younger women who entered a polygynous marriage, secrecy again played a pivotal role in whether they evaluated their marital life positively or negatively. Both were in their early twenties when they were approached for marriage almost immediately after their conversion. In both cases, their suitors were already married. One of them was open about it, the other one kept it a secret. In the case of Selma, a few days after she said her *shahada*,²⁰ a fellow student proposed to marry her, telling her right away

20 On saying the *shahada* – 'I testify that there is no god but God and I testify that Mohammed is His messenger' – with the intention to convert, a person becomes Muslim.

that he was already married. Initially she rejected his offer. But as she liked him a lot, they stayed in touch, and she began to consider his proposal seriously. Eventually they agreed to marry. She asked him if he had informed his first wife, which he confirmed, and after 3 months the two women met each other.

Married for 7 years at the time of the interview, she told us that the fact that he was honest with his first wife was of great importance to her:

Suppose my husband comes home and tells me ‘a few days ago, I married a third woman’, I would be devastated. If you have love and respect for each other, you need to inform one another. I cannot imagine doing something like that behind someone’s back.

Reflecting on the general lack of acceptance of her choice, she admits that although the mother of her husband herself was a second wife, the practice was frowned upon by his female relatives, and she had not told her own family. The stigma of being a second wife amongst Muslims surprised her.

Women who practise Islam in a serious manner but who go crazy when you tell them you are a second wife. I never understand that because it is in the Qur’an. So if you are indeed a practising Muslim, why are you so judgemental? Of course, you need to overcome some jealousy . . . but my husband is not my possession. Some people say, ‘my husband is mine’. I think that is quite peculiar.

Sophie, on the other hand, who was also proposed to by a man she had met online within weeks of her conversion, was unaware that he was already married when she accepted his proposal. Soon after, she found out he had a child and confronted him with questions. He admitted he was still legally married but explained that he had married when he was very young, that the marriage was not working out and that a divorce was imminent. Trusting that this marriage was effectively over, she went ahead and married him Islamically. Soon, however, she found out that his first wife was pregnant with their second child, which he explained had happened when they had tried to save the marriage. Because of the pregnancy, he remained married to both.

By the time Sophie herself was pregnant with her second child, his first wife had had enough and wanted a divorce. Believing she was his only wife for a while, Sophie then found out her husband had secretly married again and fathered a child. She felt betrayed and deceived: ‘Not so much because he had married again, but because he had hidden it from me’. After that, she decided it would be best if he left the house and lived on his own, but they remained married. The new second wife was informed as well. She had been married before and was divorced, with the care of four young children; she too decided to stay married. They both felt some empathy towards each other, and Sophie told her she could always contact her if she wanted to discuss something.

Perhaps I can help her with things. After all, I was in her position once. I have ten years of experience [with polygyny], so I can handle it better. She struggles with it a lot, which is understandable. She is not ready to contact me yet but we are in it together. . . . My expectations [of marriage] have changed. Before, I had this dream image and now not so much. But that does not mean it cannot work out.

8.6 Polygyny as an option

Amongst our interlocutors, there was a consensus that men need to be able to handle multiple marriages correctly: promoting equality in both a material and an emotional (and sexual) sense. In practice, the second wife would often provide for herself. Whereas there was a profound dislike of the idea that a second wife would be on welfare, if she waived her right to be provided for, that was considered her right as well. Maria's marriage as a third wife was organised around such an agreement. Over 40, she had been married with children before she divorced, had a busy, well-paid job and was engaged in volunteer work in her spare time. She explained, 'In this life phase it is actually quite alright to have someone to share the good and bad times with, my passions and dreams, but who is not around all of the time. That is a real benefit!'

There were also others amongst our interlocutors who considered polygynous marriage an option, evaluating it more positively. Sometimes this was the case because they were used to living on their own and no longer desired to live with 'a full-time husband'. As a divorced convert in her late thirties explained, 'I would consider it an option to marry as a second wife. I have children, I do not necessarily want more children. Unless I meet Prince Charming, I would definitely be open to the idea.' Another convert considered polygyny an acceptable or perhaps even a desirable option, as she did not want to have children at all. Recognising the importance of marriage in Islam, she considered a part-time husband who had children with another woman a workable solution.

8.7 Conclusion

Both participants in public debate and policymakers consider polygyny undesirable; this is also the case for Muslims. Whereas marriage legislation has always prohibited polygyny, such marriages have become more strongly condemned because they are linked to two other forms of marriage that have become increasingly controversial since the 1990s: migrant marriages and Islamic marriages. Marriage with an 'imported' bride or groom from the country of origin was seen as a particular threat to integration and as harmful for the women, as these women were often considered the victims of forced marriages. Islamic marriages (conducted prior to a civil marriage) were also increasingly targeted as illegal, using the very same arguments to discredit this marriage format;

these marriages were seen as contributing to the development of parallel societies and as putting women at risk of forced marriage, enabling marriages of minors and polygynous marriages. As a result also polygynous marriages concluded abroad are no longer recognised if a Dutch national and someone having the Netherlands as their main residence were involved.

As our convert interlocutors were often married to a (post)-migrant, and for religious reasons rather quickly entered an Islamic marriage, they were already confronted with the problematisation of both forms of marriage. When they also then entered a polygynous marriage arrangement, they risked ostracisation not only by the majority population but also by Muslims. The ways in which they signified their engagement in these marriages was, not surprisingly, more complex and nuanced than the dominant perspectives presented in public debate. To them, as converts, discussions about integration did not make sense. Rather than self-segregating, they felt pushed out of the nation after conversion (see Vroon-Najem 2014). Most of our interlocutors did not consider polygyny an attractive option, yet those entering such a marriage did not consider themselves victims of a forced marriage.

The narratives of the women concerned point to a variety of positions. It is evident that age matters, in both their evaluation of these marriages and how they deal with them. Another major element, besides being the first or the second wife, was whether the husband can engage in polygyny in the correct way, which refers to equal treatment and honesty/openness.

Age matters in various ways. On the one hand, age tallies with experience. Young women who had entered a polygynous relationship often, in hindsight, considered themselves naïve, they had taken a risk and felt lucky if it worked out well. Older women, in contrast (or the same woman once she had grown older) would underline the problem that for them – often also divorced or widowed, and perhaps with children – it was very difficult to find a husband. They considered being married as a second wife a better option than remaining single, both because of the religious value of marriage and because they felt in need of someone who would support them. A few women explained that to them polygyny was a positive option, as they preferred a ‘part-time’ husband.

What mattered most in polygynous marriages was whether a husband could live up to the demands of such a marriage. He would need the financial means to maintain both wives and the emotional ability to treat them equally in time and attention. Another major aspect is whether he was open and trustworthy. Polygyny generally worked much better when both the first and the second wife had been informed (and sometimes consulted) in advance of the second marriage; polygynous marriages where one of the wives was held ‘secret’ did not last long.

More generally, the evaluation of polygynous marriages depends much on the positionality of those involved. Women entering such a marriage generally fare better if they themselves have access to material resources, a good network and legal and religious literacy. This is the case for all kinds

of relationships, whether a civil marriage, an Islamic marriage or cohabitation. Polygynous marriages (not recognised as such in the Netherlands) are particularly condemned because it is Muslims who enter such marriages. Differences in the evaluation of polyamory in public debate speak for that. Yet the growing interest in polyamory may in some sense become helpful for women in polygynous arrangements. Whereas polygyny is prohibited because of its alleged harmfulness for women, the prohibition of such marriages and increased criminalisation – also because of the intersection with religious-only and migrant marriages – may cause harm. For our interlocutors, important considerations when evaluating polygyny included whether certain rules were followed, particularly equal treatment. However, also if a husband makes efforts to treat his wives equally, because of the criminalisation of polygyny, this is nearly impossible to arrange as there are no ways to provide both wives with an equal legal status. Whereas it is possible to make specific arrangements, this option is both costly and requires a high level of legal literacy. It is very unlikely that the state will make accommodations to Muslims, but discussions about whether there is a need and opportunity to provide better legal protection for all partners in a polyamorous relationship may benefit Muslim couples who opt for a polygynous life.

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