

# The Small House Phenomenon and Polygyny in Zimbabwe: A Problematic Context for Child Socialisation and Development

by

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## Abstract

The study juxtaposes the small house marital relationship with polygyny and explores the former as a context for child socialisation and development. This study was conducted in units O and N residential suburbs in Chitungwiza, Zimbabwe. The purposive sampling technique was adopted to acquire research participants. In collecting the qualitative data, in-depth interviews and document analysis were used. The juxtaposition of the small house phenomenon with polygyny illuminated numerous continuities and discontinuities of the traditional polygynous marital practice. The study reveals that polygyny remains a contested terrain, although women would like to ensure its total demise; and in contrast, men clandestinely perpetuate polygyny albeit disguised as the small house. However, the general perceptions were that polygyny is no longer compatible with the contemporary political and socio-economic dispensations. The study also established that the small house family structure tends to be a problematic context for child socialisation and development as a result of absent fatherhood and lone parenthood and that the girl child's situation is worse-off, and thus, children from such households tend to experience a myriad of challenges at school, culminating in poor academic performance.

**Key Terms:** polygyny, *small house*, hegemonic masculinity, absent fatherhood, lone parenthood.

## Introduction

The study juxtaposes the *small house* phenomenon; an emerging family structure in the Zimbabwean contemporary society with the traditional polygynous marital practice among the Shona people. This juxtaposition exposes quite numerous continuities and discontinuities between the two phenomena in the context of the Shona culture. Apparently both husbands and wives are uneasy with this juxtaposition.

More so, the *small house* has been found to be a problematic context for child socialisation and development as a result of absent fatherhood and lone parenthood small house households. In this regard, the girl child is affected more by the small house family context due to the rigid dichotomous gender division of labour informed by the stereotypical perceptions on femininity and masculinity in the Shona culture. As polygyny becomes a contested terrain, sociological and anthropological ramifications of this contestation become quite apparent as the Shona society adapts to the ever evolving cultural dynamics of the so called 'modern' society. To understand the cultural dynamism of the Shona marital systems, Connell's theory of gender and power has been adopted as a conceptual framework.

According to Jonas (2012:143) the term polygamy is derived from the Greek word *polugamos* which literally means 'often marrying'. Generally people use the term polygamy to refer to the simultaneous unions of a husband to multiple spouses or a custom of having more than one wife at the same time. It is important to note that such a meaning is technically incorrect. In this regard Zeitzen (2008:2) postulates that in its wide and correct sense, polygamy refers to a marriage which includes more than one partner and it exists in two forms; polygyny and polyandry. Jonas (2012:143) further elaborates that polygyny is when a man is married to more than one wife whereas polyandry refers to an arrangement where a woman is married to more than one husband. Similarly Falen (2003:53) says polygyny refers to one type of polygamy in which men have multiple wives (co-wives), as opposed to polyandrous polygamy in which a woman has multiple husbands. Thus as indicated above, polygyny and polygamy are not synonymous; neither can they be used interchangeably. However the reason why so many people use the two words interchangeably is that polyandry is a very rare practice especially in Southern African societies hence for many people polygyny is synonymous to polygamy. To illustrate the rarity of polyandry, a study of 250 societies by Murdock in 1949 (in Henslin 2003) reveals that polyandry existed in two societies only; among the Marquessons of Polynesia and the Todas of India. This study aptly adopts the term polygyny to refer to a marriage union where a man has more than one wife and uses it consistently in the entire study.

On the other hand the *small house* is an informal, long term, secret sexual relationship with another woman who is not a man's legal wife, carried on in another residential suburb (Chingandu, 2007:1; Hungwe, 2012). Chingandu (2007) further elaborates that the small house phenomenon is a relatively recent cultural practice in which the western concept of monogamous marriage is upheld nominally, but in actual fact the husband has another secret family. Although *small house* marital unions are generally not acknowledged by the Zimbabwean society, involvement in such unions may be commonly known in communities but hidden from the original family. In other words the *small house* phenomenon is characterised by a husband who engages in a quasi-permanent extra-marital affair which is kept a secret to the original family. Structurally the *small house* family resembles the traditional polygynous marital practice found in most Southern African societies.

## Statement of the Problem

There seems to be conflict of interest between tradition and modernity with reference to marital practices among the Shona people. Because of colonialism, Christianity and western education; the vehicles for westernisation, traditional polygynous marital practices tend to be despised as they are regarded as uncivilised, backwards and counter development. Both men and women seem to agree that polygyny is no longer compatible with modernity hence women celebrate this achievement. However the problem emerges when polygyny is juxtaposed with the *small house* phenomenon and women's celebration is short-lived as they realise that polygyny has not ceased but simply transformed into another form (the *small house*). On the other hand men become uneasy with this juxtaposition because it exposes their polygynous tendencies albeit disguised as the *small house*. One other critical issue is that the small house family becomes a problematic context for child socialisation and development as a result of absent fatherhood and lone parenthood. Is the *small house* a euphemism for polygyny? If so what then are the sociological and anthropological implications for this seemingly secretive and unsanctioned family structure with reference to children's welfare and socialisation?

## Research Questions

- What are the continuities and discontinuities between polygyny and the *small house* phenomenon?
- Why do both men and women become uneasy with polygyny juxtaposed with the *small house* phenomenon?
- What challenges are faced by children from the *small house* family background at school?
- Can the *small house* be considered a new family structure? If so, what are the sociological implications of this 'new' family structure?

## Delimitations

The study was conducted in units O and N residential suburbs in Chitungwiza; a dormitory town for Harare. The study juxtaposed the *small house* phenomenon with polygyny focusing on continuities and discontinuities between the two phenomena .It also explored the *small house* family structure as a context for child socialisation and development.

## Conceptual Framework

To explore the gender dynamics in both polygyny and small house relationships, the study adopts Cornell's theory of gender and power. According to Connell (1987) the gender division of labour, gender differentials in the way men and women are perceived, and the cultural placing of men above women, all play a great role in the subjugation of women.

The aforementioned factors translate into women's poverty, powerlessness and low status which in turn affect their life chances. This could explain why women suffer in silence and endure exploitative relationships such as polygyny and small house unions. Connell's theory insists that women's experiences should be reviewed from the angle of power and dominance which the social structure awards men. By implication, the hegemonic patriarchal cultural values and practices culminate in asymmetrical marital relationships in African societies. Thus the socialisation of children in small house households takes a gender dimension as the girl child is affected more by absent fatherhood and lone parenthood. Cornell (1987) further argues that hegemonic masculinity manifests itself in varying forms and is constantly evolving to suit different contexts. In this regard the small house becomes a 'new' brand of hegemonic masculinity in the context of modernity; hence the juxtaposition of polygyny and small house unions reveals pervasive hegemonic masculinities in traditional and modern times respectively. Concomitantly, such juxtaposition exposes the renaissance of polygyny albeit disguised as the small house.

## **The Practice of Polygyny**

Historically polygyny was an acknowledged and even regarded as an ideal institution of marriage in most Southern African societies prior to the advent of colonialism and spread of Christianity by missionaries. However, in contemporary African societies, many people tend to shun the polygynous marriage practice as they adopt western ideals and Christian values which contradict African traditional practices (Zeitzen 2008:156). In this regard Goody (1973:175) comments that as a form of marriage, polygyny has been considered to be morally wrong by Christian missionaries. Karanja (1987:253) concurs and adds that even some well-educated Christianised African elites in Africa south of the Sahara feel polygyny is shameful and label it backward although they continue the practice of multiple sexual partners in the form of 'outside wives'. Traditionally polygyny was a symbol of status for men who acquired more wives because of their productivity especially in agriculture (Fenske 2011:2). In such contexts socialisation of children was very high as the concepts of absent fatherhood and lone parenthood had no place. It was the responsibility of every child to monitor the behaviour of children growing in such contexts. In other words, women's productivity in agriculture was a contributing factor to the emergence of polygyny in African societies. Another contributing factor to the emergence of polygyny had to do with stereotypical perceptions on male sexuality. In a patriarchal society, as is the case with many African societies, men with many sexual conquests tend to be admired for their supposed virility. The study by Zeitzen (2008:161) in East African Mandinka society reveals that the possession of several wives is seen as an expression of male virility complex. In this regard the claim on men's supposed virility can be viewed as one of the stereotypical perceptions about masculinity and femininity informed by a patriarchal ideology (Kambarami, 2006). Such perceptions tend to permeate the contemporary Zimbabwean society culminating in typically subtle and pervasive family structures like the *small house* where double standards for men and women are rife.

Traditionally in most African societies and cultures south of the Sahara, patriarchal ideologies and mechanisms tended to influence conjugal relationships. A study by Nyoni (2008:87) in Zimbabwe reveals that since Zimbabwe is a patriarchal society, power tends to be vested in males. However, it has to be acknowledged that African women's situation is unique and should be treated as such. In this regard, it is important to note that a basic premise of African feminism is that African women should draw from their own experiences. By implication polygyny and its emerging subtle forms should be examined to understand the circumstances of women and children in such marital unions. Thus when analysing the African marriage systems, it can be observed that patriarchal and polygynous tendencies permeate contemporary African societies though in more subtle and disguised ways in the form of *small house* marital arrangements and secret second urban wives.

### **The Evolving Polygynous Practice**

Modernisation and westernisation of Africa have seen the traditional polygynous practice evolving and transforming into different types of concurrent sexual partnerships. Gregson (2005:26) observes that polygyny provides a cultural background for the *small house* phenomenon. Similarly Zeitzen (2008:156) observes that in urban Africa polygyny is being transformed and replaced by other forms of union formations such as 'serial polygyny', or outside marriages. She further elaborates that modernisation and westernisation of Africa has meant that public polygyny, as practiced in African traditional societies south of the Sahara has been replaced to a large extent by second secretive unions in urban areas.

It should be acknowledged that polygyny in Africa south of the Sahara was not only a type of marriage but also a value system, and as a value system, it has been highly resistant to the competition of the imported ideology of monogamy and the impacts of various structural changes (Hayase and Llaw 1997:293). Hence a reflection on the endurance of the value system and the decline in polygynous unions in the urban areas of Africa south of the Sahara can reveal that the evolution of polygyny has been accompanied by the growth of various forms of multiple or serial informal marriages. It can therefore be argued that *small house* phenomenon is a result of an evolution of formal polygynous unions and it assumes quite a number of forms. Thus the transformation of polygynous unions into different concurrent sexual partnerships tends to illustrate the endurance of patriarchy in Africa societies although the 'reinvented' polygynous practice tends to be more prevalent in urban settings.

## Research Design and Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research design to guide the process of collecting, presenting, and analysing data on the *small house* phenomenon. Qualitative research is informed by the interpretivist paradigm. As a research paradigm, interpretivism allows an in-depth exploration of the experiences, attitudes, feelings and perceptions of the research participants on a given phenomenon (Neuman 1997:67). In this regard the study adopted qualitative data collecting methods in the form of in-depth interviews to explore the perceptions of men and women in small house unions on the *small house* phenomenon when juxtaposed with polygyny. Classroom documents such as the Attendance Register and the Social Records were analysed to understand the behaviour of learners from the small house family background. The study also adopted the purposive sampling technique to come up with 3 men and 3 women in small house relationships. There were also 12 children, who did not necessarily belong to the aforementioned families but they came from small house family backgrounds and 4 teachers as research participants. The interpretive analysis model was employed to assist in establishing emerging patterns or themes from the collected data. Lastly the analysis and interpretation of data is informed by Cornell's theory of gender and power.

The study on the small house phenomenon was conducted in Chitungwiza; although it is difficult in this study to come up with an actual population, the study assumes that all those engaging in *small house* marital arrangements in Chitungwiza constitute the population of the study. Since it is not possible to include every *small house* case in Chitungwiza into the study, I adopted purposive sampling to locate participants for the study.

Purposive sampling was utilised in identifying men and women in *small house* marital relationships, children living in *small house* family contexts and teachers teaching children from *small house* family contexts. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method in which participants are selected for a specific purpose, usually because of their unique position, experience and knowledge (Baxter & Jack 2008:9 and Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2007:114). Patton (2007:181) concurs and adds that the thrust of purposive sampling is to identify information rich sites. By implication, I selected couples in the *small house* unions, children living in *small house* family contexts and teachers teaching children from such contexts because of their respective experiences.

The study utilised qualitative data gathering methods in the form of in-depth interviews and document analysis. According to Lefland and Lefland (in Schutt 2009:315) and Cohen et al (2007:228) in-depth interviewing is a qualitative method which involves open ended, relatively unstructured questions in which the interviewer seeks in-depth information on the interviewees' feelings, experiences and perceptions on a given social phenomenon on their own terms and in the context of their situation.

This study adopted in-depth interviewing to collect critical information on the perceptions, attitudes and feelings on the *small house* phenomenon as well as challenges faced by children growing in such contexts. Since interviews are a form of face to face interaction, it allowed probing for continuities and discontinuities of the polygynous family structure. Data were also collected from analysing classroom documents such as the Attendance Register, Social Records as well as Reports and Individual Progress Records. These documents provided information on family background, school attendance and academic performance of children living small house family contexts.

The qualitative, data was presented as thick descriptions of individual *small house* cases and verbatim citations from interviews. The study adopted an interpretive analysis model which helped in establishing emerging patterns or themes from the collected data. Gall et al (2007:466) and Cohen et al (2007:86) describe interpretive analysis as the process of examining case study closely in order to find constructs, themes and patterns that can be used to describe and explain the phenomenon being studied. Analysis and interpretation of data was informed by the relevant conceptual framework; Connell's theory of gender and power.

Ethics in research involve considerations such as fairness, honesty, respect for integrity of individuals and confidentiality of certain information (Schutt 2009:72). The study sought informed consent from research participants. Since *small house* relationships tend to be unacknowledged by society, it was important to maintain confidentiality and privacy of the participants, especially those directly involved in the *small house* marital unions. To protect the anonymity of research participants, I used pseudonyms for the *small house* couples.

## **Discussion of Findings**

The practice of polygyny served very critical functions in the traditional Shona society (Tatira 2010:13). This marriage practice was quite compatible with both the political and socio-economic dispensations of the time. Although the practice of polygynous marriage seems to be on the decline, evidence from this study reveals that the phenomenon is far away from demise.

An interview with Sam small house spouse reveals:

*You see, in this modern era to have two wives is seen as being uncivilised. But you know, a 'real' man is seen by the number of sexual conquests he possesses. So, having a secret wife or the so called small house is our innovation as men to suit the changing times.*

It would seem that because of westernisation and cultural imperialism both men and women tend to shun the once revered polygynous marriage as they now regard it as backward and uncivilised. Paradoxically, the practice of keeping secret 'outside wives' (*small houses*) instead of polygynous wives may represent African men's attempt to embody western ideals of a 'modern man' (Zeitzen, 2008:156). By implication evidence from this study reveals that the *small house* relationship represents an African cultural renaissance as the *small house* tends to be defacto polygyny. However the *small house* as a family structure has been found to be a problematic context for child socialisation and development due to absent fatherhood and subsequent lone parenthood. Thus the juxtaposition of the *small house* phenomenon with polygyny reveals phenomenal continuities and discontinuities in terms of norms, values and relevance or purpose. It is important to note that the continuities and discontinuities of the polygynous marital practice have tremendous sociological and anthropological ramifications on the Shona culture and society at large. Consequently African feminists have become very critical of the entrenched cultural practices such as polygyny which they regard as dehumanising, retrogressive and oppressive of women (Gaidzanwa, 2010).

In another interview Themba another man in small house relationship partner had this to say:

*Our forefathers married several wives so that they could have as many children to till the land. As you can see many children are an economic burden now and we have machinery to till the land. Children seem irrelevant for agricultural purposes. However, this as it may, I still need a younger female partner to keep me going.*

The above response reveals that polygyny is no longer compatible with the contemporary political and economic dispensation. It is however important to understand that traditionally polygyny was informed and regulated by Shona cultural norms and values hence it became a sanctioned marital structure (Tatira, 2010). However as argued by Giddens' Structuration theory, people have agency; that is the capability of creating reality, thus the *small house* becomes an innovation by men to embody the entrenched polygynous marital practice albeit transformed as the *small house* to confront the ever evolving and dynamic society. The realisation that polygyny has not disappeared makes most wives or women in general uneasy; in fact the practice has become more entrenched and insidious in secretive relationships. Thus the *small house* phenomenon becomes a detour to the traditional polygynous practice which women tend to so much despise.

At a time when women were expecting to celebrate the demise or decline of polygynous marriage, they find themselves embarrassed when the *small house* is juxtaposed with polygyny. However, an interview with one married woman reveals that women would be better off in polygynous marital relationships than having a husband with a *small house*. She elaborates:



*Both polygyny and the small house are not favourable relationships, they both undermine our integrity and rights and hurt our self and worthiness. However comparing the two practices it would be better to be in polygynous marriage because the relationship is relatively transparent. The small house is secretive, destructive and risky. I wish if men could be human, sincere and respect our integrity by sticking to one partner.*

Such a voice of dissent, resentment and bitterness tends to be provoked by the juxtaposition of the *small house* phenomenon with polygyny. What is so conspicuous in the above response is the pervasive hegemonic patriarchy which culminates in the subjugation of women in both polygynous and small house unions (Cornell, 1987). It is also very clear from the sentiments given by the woman above that the *small house* family structure is detrimental to the contemporary society as it continues to perpetuate a patriarchal ideology thereby undermining women's emancipation.

On the other hand the juxtaposition of the *small house* phenomenon with polygyny illuminates the entrenched stereotypical perceptions on the male sexual virility. According to Tatira (2010) and Zeitzen (2008:148) men need a number of sexual partners especially young women to rejuvenate their sexual prowess and prove their masculinity. Such sentiments were echoed by one man during an interview:

*Yes polygyny is out-dated but there is one thing that you cannot deny; men need a variety of sexual conquests. It really rejuvenates their sexual robustness and prowess. The small house becomes one such options because as men traditionally and naturally we want to prove our masculinity; 'ndokuti murume'(that's being a real man).*

Such perceptions argue for a very strong and robust patriarchal orientation in which men believe that multiple concurrent relationships are their right through tradition and culture. However, the reason why the *small house* is secretive is that men in the contemporary society are uneasy with such relationships especially if it is likened to polygyny. The above sentiments illuminate how men tend to justify their philandering behaviour on the basis of tradition. This is why African feminists are so keen to revise some of the traditional practices that are oppressive of women. It is observed here that men's behaviour reflect double standards where in public they are monogamously married while secretively they are polygynous. When all this is happening, it is children growing in such contexts who suffer as a result of absent fatherhood and lone parenthood.

An anthropological study of the Shona culture by Bourdillon (1993) reveals that polygyny was not only a form of marriage but also a value system. As a value system it was compatible with the economic dispensation of the time because several wives and by implication many children meant a huge labour reservoir to till the land.

Apparently the contemporary economic dispensation seems to be incompatible with polygyny because several wives and many children imply an economic burden (Caldwell & Caldwell, 1987). As has already been alluded to, the continuity of polygyny albeit disguised as the *small house* points to entrenched stereotypical perceptions on male sexual virility since it does not make economic sense in this contemporary society. Such attitudes are informed by traditional and cultural perceptions on masculinity and femininity. However one thing becomes quite clear, basing on the evidence from this study; the *small house* family may not be a conducive context for child socialisation and development. These gender dynamics in the context of marital relationships are best explained by Connell (1987) when she argues that, when we speak of masculinity and femininity, we are naming configurations of gender practice. These configurations have ramifications on domination and subservience by men and women respectively in marital relationships. Connell further argues that hegemonic masculinity is heterosexual and is closely tied to marriage. By implication hegemonic masculinity allows men to marry as many wives culminating in asymmetrical relations in marital relationships which affect the welfare of children.

A follow up with children living in *small house* family contexts to school revealed that children coming from such family backgrounds experience serious challenges at school. Of the 12 children coming from the *small house* family background, 10 had not paid fees and of these 10, 6 of them were girls. By inference such children are likely to underachieve academically because many a time they are sent home to collect fees. In doing so, such children lose learning time and miss concepts taught culminating in underachievement. Among these children, 8 had no complete uniform and did not bring food to school; again of these 8, 5 of them were girls. This reflects that absent fatherhood and subsequent lone parenthood affects the girl child more than the boy child. Lack of uniform may affect children's self-esteem, confidence and motivation. Teachers teaching these children confirmed observing signs of withdrawal and lack of confidence among these children. Such behaviours argue for lack of parental involvement in child socialisation and support. It is quite true that a hungry child may not concentrate in class. More so; lack of adequate food results in malnutrition affecting the health of the child and consequently academic performance is compromised.

An interview with one teacher reveals:

*I have observed that children from small house family backgrounds experience similar financial or resource problems faced by children from polygynous backgrounds. However children from small house backgrounds have more serious behaviour problems. Admittedly, a few of these children are well looked after but on the whole the majority struggle financially. It is also important to note that financial burden faced by the husband also affect the welfare of children from the main family. I have observed that the girl child is affected more as she rarely comes to school or come to school late every time.*

Thus the juxtaposition of the small house with polygyny reveals that just like in polygynous family background, resources tend to be overstretched and become inadequate for all members of the family. In fact the situation for children in *small house* families is even worse because such families are kept a secret hence resources from the father may not be equitably shared (are those from the small house more disadvantaged than those from the first wife. In this regard the small house contrasts sharply with polygyny, because in polygynous marriages wives and children share common residence or live in close proximity. In fact in this case the small house resembles a lone parent family where the mother has no ample time with children because of other engagements such as vending to supplement family income or extra-marital affairs. Hence the juxtaposition of the small house with polygyny illuminates discontinuities between the two phenomena.

Another critical observation on children coming from small house families is that they tend to form ant-school sub cultural groups. Teachers at the school confirmed that school attendance for these children tends to be erratic. Similarly attendance registers confirmed a lot of absenteeism by these children. A close analysis of this problem reveals that some of them play truancy while others particularly girls are asked by their mothers to stay home so that they could assist in vending air time or some freezits. Such activities amount to child labour which compromises school attendance and ultimately academic performance. Class progress records showed that children coming from small house households perform badly in tests written at the end of the month and end of term. It is therefore argued that absent fatherhood and subsequent lone parenthood in small house families affects monitoring of children's behaviour including their study habits leading to academic underperformance. However in such situations the girl child's situation comes worse because she tends to be overburdened by domestic chores and vending activities. In this regard Cornell's theory of gender and power point out that the gender division of labour and the cultural practices which favour men contribute immensely to the subjugation of women. Thus the gender based division of labour leads to differential academic achievement between boys and girls. Progress records in school also show that for children coming from non-resident father households, the girl child's academic performance comes worse-off.

One girl child from the small house family elaborates in an interview:

*Most of the time, I am alone at home. My mother always comes home late. She is at home when father is around and my father visits us three or four times a month. My mother forces me to sell freezits and I hate it.*

The above evidence confirms that the small house family may not be the best context for child socialisation and development particularly for the girl child.

Among the 12 children who were studied 2 of them were Early Childhood Development (ECD) learners. Observations made were that these children tend to lag behind in terms of language acquisition and development and this points to lack of social capital and socialisation. An interview with one ECD teacher revealed that these children have limited vocabulary and face challenges in expressing themselves. The teacher also observed limited participation by these children in both indoor and outdoor play activities. This argues for a constrained home background with limited interaction and parental involvement in the socialisation of children living in such households. On the contrary, children from polygynous families have high interaction opportunities because the large family lives together or in close proximity hence they have little challenges in expressing themselves. Generally the poor academic performance by children from the *small house* family backgrounds can be attributed to limited interaction as well as the poor socio-economic background because the father is always away and tends to be overwhelmed by his role as a provider. In other words, the small house marital relationship is a typical 'polygynous' family structure and may not be compatible with the contemporary socio-economic dispensation. Such a context affects child socialisation and development and the girl child emerges worse-off.

## Conclusion

The juxtaposition of the small house phenomenon with polygyny exposes continuities and discontinuities of traditional polygynous marital practice. It has been observed that both men and women become uneasy with such juxtaposition. Polygyny as a marriage practice becomes a contested terrain as husbands wives seem not to agree on its relevance and purpose. Because of westernisation and cultural imperialism people tend to shun polygyny in favour of monogamy. Using Connell's theory of gender and power, women's experiences can be viewed from the angle of power and dominance. The study established that the small house phenomenon is simply a euphemism for polygyny. It perpetuates the hegemonic patriarchal, cultural values and practices which promote the subjugation of women in general and the girl child in particular hence it becomes a problematic context for child socialisation and development

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