

# When there is more than one wife...

**Is the tradition of polygamy (marriages where the husband has more than one wife) fair on women?**  
**Thoraya Pandy looks at the issue**

**N**ambita Vimbela found out five years after she married Mbulelo that he had another wife.

"Mbulelo came from the Ciskei to work in Johannesburg. When he asked me to marry him I asked him if he had another wife. Mbulelo said no, so I agreed to marry him," remembers Vimbela.

She says he would go to the Ciskei alone during holidays.

"He always had an excuse for not taking me along. In 1965 Mbulelo took me with him to the Ciskei. On our way to his home he told me he had another wife. I could not believe it. I felt very bad and betrayed," says Vimbela.

This was not all. One morning, while still in the Ciskei, Vimbela woke up and found that Mbulelo had gone back to Johannesburg with his other wife.

"I refused to stay in the Ciskei and found my way back to the city.

"Although I went back to him, I did not trust him. He sent his wife back to the Ciskei because I refused to live in the same house as her.

"I got a job so that I could survive without him," she says.

In 1975, Vimbela returned from work one day and found her husband had taken their children and all her belongings. Mbulelo

had taken the children to the Ciskei.

"After three years of fighting to get them back, my children came to live with me again. I no longer saw him as my husband," says Vimbela.

"It's a shame that we (women) are not treated equally. In the early days polygamy was okay because the wives were treated equally and with respect. Today, this is not the case. They cannot be happy because they think of their situation all the time. Men like that are selfish," she adds.

Ruwayda Davids happily agreed to becoming Mohamed's



Photo by Gill De Vlieg



**Polygamous marriages often lead to large families living in small houses**

second wife. According to the Quran, Muslim men can marry up to four wives.

"The only things I wanted from him were love, respect and equality. I knew I'd be sharing him with someone else," says Davids.

For two years Davids was happy in her marriage.

"I got jealous when he went to his other wife (we did not live in the same house) but I learnt to accept it. Besides, he would always tell me if he was not coming home."

"When he stopped telling me he was not coming home, I just assumed he was with his other

wife. Later I found out he was seeing another woman. When I asked him about it, he said I have no right to question him and that he can and will do whatever he wants. I became very depressed and would burst into tears all the time.

"I'm not thinking of getting divorced. After eight years of marriage, where can I go? What must I do?" she asks hopelessly.

Beauty Mkhize, chairperson of the Rural Women's Movement, says her organisation wants polygamy abolished in a new South Africa.

"In the majority of cases, women in polygamous marriages

are not supported by their husbands. Rural women and their children suffer more because their



**Beauty Mkhize of the Rural Women's Movement**

Photo by Elmond Jiyane, Dynamic Images

husbands come to the city and forget they have another family.

"Women are forced to do work that is too hard for them."

Mkhize says many women work in the forests chopping down trees.

"Some have been killed by trees falling on them. These women do not receive any compensation if they get killed or injured and when they die, their children are left stranded."

She says men have changed the custom of polygamy.

"In the beginning food was plentiful. Men would marry again to provide a home and security for women. Men had to consult with the first wife and their families if they wanted to marry again. It was their duty to treat all their wives and children equally. If this did not happen the wives and families would speak to him about it. Today, this seldom happens. Often men will simply not tell their wives if they are having affairs. This is why we want polygamy abolished," says Mkhize.

Roshieda Shabodien of the Call of Islam agrees.

"The Quran limits a man to four wives under very strict



Roshieda Shabodien of the Call of Islam

conditions. A man must treat all of his wives equally."

At the same time the Quran argues that a man should rather have one wife because treating each woman equally would be difficult, says Shabodien

"The Quran also pins down polygamy to a particular time. It was to help women and children who lost their husbands and fathers in battles which Muslim men were fighting. Despite this clear position people continue to interpret it wrongly.

"This has resulted in many hardships for most women in polygamous marriages," she adds.

"Polygamy has often simply meant deserting one family for another without any maintenance for the first family. This gets worse when religious leaders permit polygamy, but do nothing to make sure that justice takes place for the abandoned wife and children involved," says Shabodien.

She says the Islamic principle of the man having to ask his first wife if he can marry again is often forgotten.

"The struggle for justice, equality and consultation between men and women must be at the core of Islam again. This is going to be a long struggle and as women, we must use avenues open to us.

"We must not regard marriage as something romantic but also as a civil contract. Women can state in their marriage contract that the husband shall not take a second wife at all or without her consent.

"Women today are not without power. They work, they contribute a lot to the household and can join women's

organisations which are fighting against women's oppression."

She called on Muslim women to join the struggle to re-look at Islam according to what God wanted it to be. ○

### What do organisations say about polygamy?

**Inkatha** supports polygamy saying it respects cultural traditions and the right to marry in any form that is acceptable, in terms of customary laws.

The **PAC** does not have a position saying polygamy has not been addressed in the organisation because it is a sensitive issue.

There is a position that members can express their own views on the matter.

The **ANC** does not have a clear position. The **ANC** does not support traditional practices which are sexist, racist and oppressive towards women. Laws must protect women and children in polygamous marriages.

**AZAPO** does not have a position saying the question of polygamy still needs to be looked at by all sectors of Azapo. There is a position that members must respect their partners and that women should not be treated as juniors.