

**Review of Nina Nurmila, *Women, Islam and Everyday Life: Renegotiating Polygamy in Indonesia*, London/New York: Routledge 2009, xviii + 197 pp., ISBN 978-0-415-67387-7**

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This highly readable, cogently presented and well-argued ethnographic study highlights legal, economic, political, social and religious developments in Indonesia to provide a context for discussions on polygamy paired with the lived experiences of polygamous households in Java, Indonesia. In this book, Nina Nurmila investigates four aspects of polygamy: Muslim discourses; women's perspectives and experiences with polygamy in the post-Soeharto period (after 1998); Indonesian society's responses to polygamous marriages; and how polygamy affects the well-being of women and their children. Given the heated debates in Indonesia over polygamy, this study makes a welcome contribution to our understanding of the subject with its inclusion of women's voices, and furthers the broader discussion on issues pertaining to women in majority-Muslim societies and their discursive, legal and experiential dimensions. The book consists of an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, and contains a glossary, maps and tables. Overall, *Women, Islam and Everyday Life* provides an excellent overview of marriage and family structure in Java and Muslim discourses on polygamy in Indonesia in addition to providing ethnographic information on polygamous marriages. It cogently argues that polygamy is a source of injustice towards women and children and calls for the abolition of polygamy in a just Muslim legal regime.

The introduction lays out the methodological framework, which is feminist in its reconstruction of knowledge from the perspective of women. In addition to textual research, it incorporates an ethnographic study of polygamous households. The first two chapters (Chapters 2 and 3) lay out the background for understanding the practice of polygamy through an examination of women's situation, changing patterns of marriage and family structure, feminist critiques of the family, as well as the debates on polygamy prior to the enactment of

the 1974 Marriage Law. The next two chapters (Chapters 4 and 5) draw heavily on field research to present Indonesian attitudes towards polygamy, the living arrangements of polygamous marriages and the economic management of polygamous households, and the impact of polygamy on children of polygamous households.

In Chapters 2 and 3, Nurmila points out that polygamy, constituting approximately 5% of all marriages, is not a widespread phenomenon in Indonesia, and likely even less so after the enactment of the 1974 Marriage Act, which paradoxically both endorsed polygamy and made it more difficult. A discussion of the role of class, kinship and Islamist formulations of sexuality is followed by an examination of changing patterns of marriage and parenthood. Feminist critiques of the family show that the idealisation of marriage as facilitating a harmonious environment for establishing a family masks the reality that it can instead be fraught with violence and emotional trauma. Despite critiques levelled at Western feminism, Nurmila contends that its tools are useful in identifying gender inequalities and uneven power relations within the context of marriage and family.

The belief that the *Qur'ān* sanctions polygamy leads to a discussion of *shari'a* in Chapter 3, followed by an enlightening discussion of Muslim interpretations of polygamy, where Nurmila adopts a threefold taxonomy of such interpretations: the Textualists, who believe that Islam permits polygamy; the Semi-textualists, who hold that polygamy can only be practiced if the wives are treated equally; and the Contextualists, who believe that polygamy should be prohibited. Women's organisations' calls for marriage law reform and the robust debates on polygamy nonetheless led to the failure of the 1974 Marriage Act to prohibit polygamy, an issue that is discussed with clarity within the context of Indonesia's political and pluralistic environment. A critique of the 1974 Marriage Act follows to reveal its strengths and failures, as well as government marriage regulations for civil servants. The remainder of the chapter examines the promotion of polygamy in the post-Soeharto period, focusing especially on Puspo Wardoyo, a highly successful restaurant owner who, after marrying four wives, began an active, Islam-based campaign to justify polygamy and became a model for polygamous men when he won the Polygamy Award instituted by Islamist journalists in 2003. [In this respect, the work of Nelly van Doorn Harder and James B. Hoesterer is worth a mention for their contributions to the construction of Indonesian masculinities.] The genesis, impact and responses to the normativisation of polygamy represented by the Polygamy Award highlight the controversies connected to polygamy in Indonesia, and set the stage for the remaining two chapters, which draw upon ethnographic evidence to destabilise the pro-polygamy narrative representing polygamy as an idealised marital practice permitted or recommended by religion.

Accordingly, Chapter 4 presents six case studies of polygamous marriages in Java in keeping with the taxonomy developed earlier: those that display the textualist, the semi-textualist and the contextualist positions. Rich with detail, the chapter provides evidence to show the deleterious effects of polygamy on the wives' physical, mental and economic well-being, in some cases extending to emotional and physical abuse. Such evidence, argues Nurmila, supports the argument of many progressive Indonesian feminists, who argue that polygamy is a form of violence against women and therefore is against women's human rights (2014: 114); moreover, it does not appear to be the means to attain the

goal spelled out in *Qur'ān* 30: 21: 'And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves mates that you may find tranquility in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy. Indeed in that are signs for a people who give thought'.

Chapter 5, 'Polygamous Households' shows through case studies that the legal requirement associated with polygamy obliging a husband to treat his co-wives equally is far from the realities such wives, especially first wives, experience in the majority of the case studies considered. The 1974 Marriage Law's condition that additional wives be taken only if the husband have the financial capacity to do so was ignored by husbands, and lack of equity of treatment, fiscal and otherwise, was justified with notions such as 'justice does not mean sameness' or that more time should be spent with one wife because she had more children, or that even the Prophet had a favourite wife. Harmonious relations between wives rarely exist; in the very few cases that they do, wives justified their cooperation on their perception that it was their Islamic duty. The chapter details how some men undermine legal requirement by not registering their marriages or bribing their way to gain access to marriage certificates, the economic hardships experienced by women whose husbands cannot actually afford to take on additional wives, and explores the various marriage rosters practiced by polygamous households. In addition, it examines how polygamous households negotiate the celebrations of feast days and weddings before turning to economic management in such households and finally, the effects on children of polygamous marriages. Case study examination shows that in the majority of cases, the economic well-being of first wives and their children is negatively affected by polygamy; additionally, men who take second or more wives run the risk of borrowing and spending beyond their means. This chapter also outlines some of the emotional mal-effects on children, in some cases leading children to be suicidal or violent, along with feeling ashamed. Other children reconcile their father's polygamy with practical concerns about survival, or with Islamist arguments (while declaring they would not accept such arrangements for themselves). In theorising about why women remain in such polygamous marriages, Nurmila turns to Deniz Kandiyoti's concept of the patriarchal bargain to suggest that women barter polygamous arrangements for social status and economic security, a gamble that works better for those married to men with financial means than to those without such means. Women with independent economic means thus could be expected not to agree to such marriages; however, they do, perhaps because doing so would free them from working. While some of the men interviewed did follow religious injunctions to treat their wives justly, many did not. Overall, this chapter investigates the effects of polygamy on first wives and their children effectively to show that more often than not, it undermines the emotional and economic support marriage is thought to bring.

In her Conclusion, Nurmila engages the widely held belief that polygamy is religiously mandated and to challenge it would be to challenge Islam. Arguing that the intent of *Qur'ān* 4: 2–3, the scriptural verses cited to justify polygamy, is to prevent injustice to the powerless and not to endorse polygamy except when utilised to that end, she makes the case that an investigation into the effects of polygamy as experienced by wives and children shows that it actually perpetuates injustice rather than justice. While affirming that the *Qur'ān* is divinely inspired, Nurmila contends that the popular Indonesian belief that Islam endorses polygamy by considering it better than *zina* (adultery) or *sunnah*

*Rasul* (recommended by the Prophet) is a matter of interpretation, pointing out that other Muslim-majority societies such as Turkey and Tunisia have prohibited polygamy as they consider it to be not Islamic. The endorsement of polygamy that led to its adoption in the 1974 Marriage Law, seen as a compromise handed to Islamist groups in Indonesia poses a challenge to women's organisations and those male scholars who argue against it. For Nurmila, the issue here is the lack of distinction made between the *Qur'ān* and its interpretation, and thus she calls for a contextual approach to interpreting Qur'ānic verses. Here, she draws upon Fazlur Rahman's concept of the double movement in reading the *Qur'ān* to place emphasis on the goal of the revelation rather than on its specific, historically contextualised pronouncements, and also on Muhammad Abduh's concept of *maslahat* (welfare or public interest) to call for a prohibition on polygamy. The reorientation of Islamic studies in Indonesia from a normative to a historical, sociological and empirical approach bodes well for rethinking the question of polygamous marriages despite efforts to silence progressive voices within the Indonesian academy and civil society. Her hope is that as a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Indonesia is obligated to see justice done to women, and civil society actors such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), women's organisations such as Sisters in Islam (SIS), faculty at academic institutions and some religious organisations are playing a role in working towards gender justice for women with respect to polygamy.

Overall, the book raises some broader questions. How might the *Qur'ān* and the Islamic legal and social tradition attend to the realities that contemporary Muslims face, especially when practices ostensibly authorised in scripture and imbricated in Islamic legal regimes do not continue to serve Islamic values of justice and social harmony? In this book, Nurmila joins others such as Fazlur Rahman, Muhammad Abduh, Amina Wadud, Nimet Barazangi and others in calling for continual re-reading and re-interpreting the *Qur'ān* utilising hermeneutical strategies that employ a values-driven lens through which the *Qur'ān* is understood rather than a literalist approach that fixes historically specific Qur'ānic dictates as obligatory for all times, places and conditions. The robust presence of gender activists in Indonesia, examined in a recent publication by Rachel Rinaldo (*Mobilizing Piety: Islam and Feminism in Indonesia*), suggests that Nurmila's call will find much-needed support. As a focused study on polygamy in Indonesia, the book provides an understanding of the complex realities that test idealised constructions of gender, the family and religious law, and would be useful for classes dealing with gender in Islam and Muslim societies, while adding to the literature on how Muslims are negotiating the contemporary terrain of modernisation, globalisation, social development and gender justice.