UNDERSTANDING WOMEN’S LIVES IN POLYGAMOUS MARRIAGES:
EXPLORING COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES IN SIERRA LEONE & DRC
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In 2016 Trócaire undertook a research project to better understand the practice and experiences of polygamy in communities in which Trócaire works. The research was conducted in two countries where Trócaire works - DRC and Sierra Leone – with two specific objectives: to describe the form that polygamy takes in the areas under study and how it is understood at local level; and to generate insights into the division of resources, responsibilities, attributes, capabilities, power and privilege within polygamous unions. Two separate research reports were compiled on each context. This report is a synthesis of the main themes and issues that emerged from these two research reports and is intended to provide insights which can inform Trócaire programming in contexts in which polygamy is prevalent. For a comprehensive account of each case, readers should refer to the full country research reports.

The country level research used as its conceptual framework the social relations approach developed by Naila Kabeer in 1994, which provides an approach to conceptualise gender relations and how they determine men and women’s respective access to resources, responsibilities, attributes, capabilities, power and privilege within the household sphere and beyond. The research also applied Whitehead’s concept of conjugal contract, defined as the ‘terms on which husbands and wives exchange goods, incomes and services, including labour, within the household’ (Whitehead, 1981, 88). A key unit of analysis in this research is the node: an organisational form at family/kinship level, consisting of one man and the women with whom he has concurrent conjugal contracts.

Research was collected in communities in DRC (in the vicinity of Mambasa and Djugu town in the Ituri region) and Sierra Leone (in the districts of Port Loko and Kambia in the Northern Province) using primary and secondary research methods. Data was collecting using three primary data collection tools: key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FDGs) and in-depth interviews. In total, approximately 300 people participated in the research.

Summary of findings

Conjugal Contracts are Embedded in Wider Gender Relations

While marriage is deeply embedded in religion, social norms and traditions, and thus contextually specific, there was also evidence of patriarchal social norms in both DRC and Sierra Leone which place men as the head of the ‘household’ and enable them greater control over resources and individuals within it. Women must negotiate the terms of exchange of their conjugal contract from a position of subordination, which was shown to have a limiting effect on their bargaining power.

In both research contexts marriage, especially for women, was both materially and socially important. Materially, women are typically dependent on their husbands for access to land for housing. Socially, women are primarily defined as mothers and wives, and there were social taboos attached to single women, who do not fulfil these gender roles. A woman who needs to leave a marriage may be able to do so if she has the social support of her family and some financial autonomy but for a woman who has neither, stepping out of a marriage can be extremely challenging if not insupportable – both socially and practically. In short, the primacy of a woman’s role as wife and mother curtails women’s capacity in these contexts and elsewhere to exercise autonomy within and outside of marriage.

1. Trócaire, “Understanding women’s lives in polygamous marriages: exploring community perspectives in DRC,” (June 2017), written by Sive Bresnihan; Trócaire, “Understanding women’s lives in polygamous marriages: exploring community perspectives in Sierra Leone,” (June 2017), written by Emma Newbury.
Both husbands and wives are expected to contribute towards the productive and reproductive activities of the node but husbands are expected to provide economic contributions to each of their wives in an equitable manner. However, when a husband enters into a second or subsequent marriage this is likely to affect his resource and time contributions to existing wives. Very few women in DRC or Sierra Leone characterised their husband’s contributions as equitable or sufficient for daily needs.

There are significant differences between women and men’s access to resources in DRC and Sierra Leone. In DRC, women were most likely to have separate farm plots and exercised relatively high levels of autonomy over the produce of their plots. In Sierra Leone a husband and co-wives farmed one piece of land collectively. The husband was highly likely to exercise control over the distribution of the harvest. Wives would be provided with a share of the harvest from this land and would have to negotiate any further contributions from the husband. In both contexts, to access greater contributions from their husbands, wives must directly or indirectly negotiate, but are disadvantaged by lack of information as their husbands are not obliged to reveal their earnings.

Concerns over unequal distribution between co-wives can foster an underlying anxiety between wives regarding the influence each has over her husband’s contributions.

Most women in polygamous unions who participated in this study engaged in individual income generation activities (mainly through small businesses) and exercised a level of control over the use of resources generated from these activities; although their individual income was mainly spent on the personal consumption needs of themselves and their own children. Where women exercised a degree of autonomy over resources they were highly unlikely to use these to support the consumption needs of other co-wives and their children.

The study revealed that wives in polygamous unions are aware of, and sensitive to, their changing levels of influence within the household, and the implications of this for their access to their spouse and resources. The anxiety over influence was reported to contribute to competitive relationships between wives in many polygamous households. In theory, social norms frame the hierarchy of co-wives based on the order of their marriage; a first wife is expected to hold a privileged position. In practice, however, the study revealed that these hierarchies are fluid and dynamic, shifting in response to changing circumstances and patterns of favouritism. Within polygamous unions, a wife’s influence is shaped by a variety of factors, including the nature of a wife’s relationship with her husband and resources that she possesses or is perceived to possess.

Co-wife relations, like all relationships, are complex and fluid. They can range (and change) from cordial to acrimonious, depending on a number of factors, including the degree to which the woman herself feels secure within the marriage as well as the extent to which a husband is perceived to be treating each wife equitably. Co-wives are connected by being part of the same node. This shared experience can generate both affinity which may persist in times of conflict and mistrust which can underscore cordial relations.
Summary of recommendations

On the basis of the research findings, the following recommendations are intended for programmers operating in polygamy-prevalent communities.

1. Invest in sensitive qualitative analysis to explore social relations in polygamous unions.

The research shows that polygamy has a structuring effect on productive activity and allocations within and across households. However, these insights are not so easily gleaned through the format of structured meetings or questionnaires. While in-depth research is not always feasible, programme design and monitoring should integrate sensitive and informed qualitative data collection and analysis to explore the social relations within polygamous unions. The tools used in the country research could be a starting point for such research.

2. Invest in robust gender, power and vulnerability analysis.

The ways in which wives in polygamous marriages navigate and experience patriarchy must be carefully analysed and understood to identify potential vulnerabilities. A strong gender and power analysis will prevent fallacious assumptions and illuminate the complex ways in which vulnerability is generated or perpetuated within marriage. It will also generate an understanding of how this vulnerability is linked to social relations within the ‘household’ and to broader family and community processes (e.g. wider family support or its absence, inheritance), as well as factors that could contribute to the empowerment of women in such contexts.

3. Integrate community & household mapping into programming.

The term ‘household’ is regularly used in development programming but is not clearly defined, and generates assumptions about the relations within it. Trócaire should consider community and household mapping as an integral part of its programming work, with the consent and awareness of programme participants and to ensure that every effort is made to mitigate potential conflict or harm.

4. Support enablers of women’s power.

The research findings suggest a correlation between the autonomy that a woman is able to exercise within marriage and assets (for example her own business, or access to land independent of her husband). In addition the findings suggest that where a woman has support from wider family networks she will be more able to extract herself – if only temporarily - from situations of conflict or violence.

For each individual context, the sources of support/empowerment should be identified and reinforced. However, to avoid unintended consequences programmes must consider relations between spouses as well as issues of power, agency and control over resources, and aim to support transformation of inequitable power relations.

5. Mitigate harm and conflict within nodes.

The research has shown how external resources can disrupt co-wife relations. On the basis of the community and household mapping and the analysis described in recommendation 3, strategies to mitigate unintended harm should also be incorporated to build consensus and support between wives or to reduce/resolve conflict. Any conflict mitigation strategies should be empowering to all women in the household, while prioritising the balance of power between men and women.
In 2016 Trócaire undertook a research project to better understand the practice and experiences of polygamy in communities in which Trócaire works. The project came out of recognition that while polygamy was a discussion point among Trócaire’s partner organisations and community groups (and within gender-based violence (GBV) and livelihoods programming in particular), in-depth knowledge of its structuring effects on intra and inter household relations and power was lacking. The potential implications of this knowledge gap for programming and the value that in-depth exploration of the subject might provide stimulated Trócaire to undertake this multi-site research project.

The research project had two specific aims:

1. To describe the form that polygamy takes in the areas under study and how it is understood at local level.
2. To generate insights into the division of resources, responsibilities, attributes, capabilities, power and privilege both within polygamous nodes and more widely in order to inform Trócaire’s programming.

During 2016, research was conducted in Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) supported by an independent research team and staff from Trócaire country offices and partner organisations. This report is a synthesis of the main themes and issues that emerged from the detailed country research reports. It is intended to support responsive and appropriate programming in communities in which polygamy is practiced. For a comprehensive account of each case, readers should refer to the full country research reports.

1.1 Conceptual Framework

The country level research was underpinned by a conceptual framework based on the social relations approach (Kabeer, 1994). The social relations approach is a way to conceptualise gender relations and how they determine men and women’s respective access to resources, responsibilities, attributes, capabilities, power and privilege within the household sphere and beyond. It provided the conceptual foundation for this research project, which focused on the practices and experiences of polygamy in localities within the Northern province of Sierra Leone (Port Loko and Kambia) and in localities in north-eastern DRC, in the province of Ituri (Djugu and Mambasa).

The social relations approach is a ‘subject sensitive’ approach to data gathering and analysis, meaning that it places emphasis on people’s accounts of everyday experience, averting the tendency to examine men and women as isolable categories or to generalise about women-in-general and men-in-general in a given setting (Cornwall et al, 2007). With its sensitivity to subject and the relationship between subject and social institution, the approach draws out the dynamics of difference within communities, the nature of relationships among women and among men and the intersection of gender with other sources of power such as age and wealth. With a social relations approach, power is not understood to emanate from any single aspect of the social system, but from a social system that enables men to mobilise a greater range of resources in a greater range of institutional domains including familial, economic and political (Kabeer, 1994).

2. Polygamy is defined as a form of marriage involving more than one wife or more than one husband. The term polygamy is used interchangeably with, and most commonly refers to, polygyny – where a man marries more than one wife. This report uses the term ‘polygamy’ to describe the marriage of a man with more than one wife, which is the form of polygamy that is prevalent in DRC and Sierra Leone.

3. See section 1.1 for a definition

4. See footnote 1.
Concepts underpinning the social relations approach:

**SOCIAL RELATIONS**
The means by which people experience and/or acquire power, as constituted through rules, resources, people & activities and embedded in institutions such as the family and broader community structures. The concept provides scope to understand the ways in which people (on grounds of gender, age, or other identity) are curtailed by and within their social worlds, but also the ways in which they navigate them.

**RESOURCES:**
The material, human and social resources that assist in increasing choice.

**WELL-BEING:**
Survival as well as the degree to which a person enjoys security and exercises autonomy, where autonomy means the ability to participate fully in the decisions that shape one’s choices and one’s life changes, at both the personal and collective level.

The three concepts of social relations, resources and well-being informed the design of the research project’s tools, the analysis of the primary data as well as the presentation of findings.

The research also applies Whitehead’s concept of conjugal contract, defined as the ‘terms on which husbands and wives exchange goods, incomes and services, including labour, within the household’ (Whitehead, 1981, 88). This conceptualisation acknowledges that a marriage contract is more than an externally generated ‘structure of control’, and that the contract’s reproduction is not automatic but the outcome of the everyday making of its meaning by women and men and by way of a multitude of daily actions; and, that it can be articulated differently by different actors and change over time (Jackson, 1995).

A key unit of analysis in this research is the node. A node is defined here as an organisational form at family/kinship level, consisting of one man and the women with whom he has concurrent conjugal contracts. The concept node was chosen as it is more flexible than the word ‘household’ as nodes can span across physical infrastructure and encompass multiple conjugal contracts.

1.2 Research sites

The research in DRC was carried out in two territories in the North-Eastern DRC province of Ituri: Mambasa and Djugu. In Sierra Leone the primary data was gathered in four communities in the districts of Port Loko and Kambia in the Northern Province. Throughout this report, references are made to ‘Sierra Leone’ and ‘DRC’. In practice, the research sites were relatively small and thus the findings cannot be assumed to apply to the countries in totality. Thus, where references are made to ‘Sierra Leone’ and ‘DRC’ in this report, it should be assumed that the findings apply specifically to the vicinity of Port Loko and Kambia in Sierra Leone, and to the vicinity of Mambasa and Djugu in DRC.

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5. In the DRC research report, the unit of analysis was labelled the ‘foyer’ as this was the French word commonly used in the context.
The territory of Mambasa – the main research site in DRC - has experienced significant socio-economic changes in recent decades as it has hosted internally displaced persons since the 2000s and due to an intensification of artisanal mining in forests to the West, which has seen the displacement of traditional hunter gatherers and intensified conflict. Islam is the predominant religion in and around the town. Christian churches, including Catholic and evangelical, are also present and intermingle, as elsewhere, with traditional belief systems. The area is ethnically diverse with a number of different ethnic groups including groups that are indigenous to the region and groups that have migrated there in recent decades. The main economic activity in the area is farming, although mining is also a prominent economic activity. Indeed, while the mines are not close (6 hours or more to travel to camps), over half of the interviewees described their husbands as being miners. Research was conducted in Mambasa town as well as nearby surrounding rural areas including Butiaba, Kilimamweza, Muchanga and Manya.

In the vicinity of Djugu, research was conducted in three sites in the Highlands and Central Highland areas (Kparganza, Lopa and Nizi). These areas are ethnically less diverse than Mambasa, with Hema (traditionally herders) and Lendu (traditionally pastoralists) constituting the primary ethnic groups. The impact of Congo’s conflicts has also been more direct and pronounced here.

The majority of Sierra Leone’s population are Muslim, but also includes a sizeable Christian community. The communities chosen were either 100% or predominately Muslim. Sierra Leone is also an ethnically diverse country with an estimated 16-20 different ethnic groups. Within the Northern Province where the research was conducted, the largest ethnic group is Themne.

In Port Loko, production of food crops, such as rice, cassava and sweet potato, are the main livelihood sources for over 80% of the population. Research in Port Loko district was conducted in the communities of Robump and Feredugu.

In Kambia, the population is ethnically diverse; the largest and most prominent ethnic groups are Themne, Susu, Limba, Fula, and Mandingo. Production of food crops, such as rice, cassava and sweet potato are the main livelihood sources, followed by cross-border trade with neighbouring Guinea. Research was conducted in the communities of Masherie Thenkle and Kaserie Mathathoi.
1.3 Methodology

The research used a qualitative methodology which aimed to elicit a breadth of experiences on polygamy. While the research methodology was altered to adapt and respond to the local context, it used four data collection methods (desk based research, key informant interviews, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews) and was conducted in three distinct phases.

Phase one comprised of both secondary and primary data collection. An initial desk-based document review was conducted to analyse the context of polygamy, including the legal status of polygamy and the prevalence of polygamy and how the practice differs across regions, religions and tribal groups within the specific contexts. To augment this literature review, perspectives on polygamy were gathered through key informant interviews (KII) and focus group discussions (FGDs) in the principle research sites.

The analysis from this phase was used to develop a loose criteria for the identification of participants for in-depth interviews (including participants from a mixture of rural and urban locations, of differing ages and of different ranks in the case of the wives (first, second, or third)). The staff from the partner organisations then engaged in discussions with community members to identify and select research participants. Each participant was fully informed about the purpose and proposed methodology before being asked for their consent.

During phase two, the analysis from phase one was used to create an in-depth interview guide which supported the conducting and analysis of in-depth interviews.

Phase three focused on verification of data and supplementing it, using a story probe to guide FDGs in Sierra Leone, and conducting supplementary in-depth interviews in DRC. Transcripts from the primary data collection were transcribed into English and analysed.
Section 2 explores the themes which emerged in the country-level research in DRC and Sierra Leone, synthesizing findings, examining patterns and trends and drawing out recommendations. Section 2.1 focuses on how the conjugal contract is influenced by wider gender norms and power relations within each context. Section 2.2 explores the different experiences of polygamy and how these are affected by social, economic and psychological factors.

2.1 The social and legal framework for polygamous marriages

2.1.1 POLYGAMOUS MARRIAGE WITHIN EACH CONTEXT

Within both country research areas polygamy was reported to be a common form of marriage. In the research communities in Sierra Leone it was the most common form of marriage, estimated to represent 70-80% of all marriages. In DRC it was estimated that one in three marriages in the research sites were polygamous. These estimations are congruent with the frequency of polygamy reported by official statistics in these regions. The Demographic Health Survey data from 2013-14 reports a prevalence rate of around 25% in Ituri province (DRC), 53% in Kambia district and 47% in Port Loko (Sierra Leone).

In both Sierra Leone and DRC, the most common form of polygamous arrangements consisted of one man and two or three wives. The most pronounced difference between the two contexts was the living arrangements of the nodes.

In Sierra Leone co-habitation of all members of the node in one dwelling was found to be most common. In DRC, segmentation of wives was most common with each individual wife living in her own dwelling, although often within the same community.

Both DRC and Sierra Leone have pluralistic legal systems encompassing both statute and customary law.

Polygamy is recognised in both countries under customary law. However, only in Sierra Leone has this customary right been translated into statute law, thus ensuring that both polygamous and monogamous registered customary marriages are protected by the general laws which endow rights to spouses. In DRC the law only recognizes registered customary marriages but only in the form of monogamy, therefore spouses can only register, and receive legal protection for, one simultaneous marriage. Thus while in Sierra...
Leone all wives in polygamous unions are entitled to benefit from legal rights including the right to inheritance on the death of their spouse; in DRC only one wife in a polygamous node is legally entitled to access these rights. However, in both contexts rates of customary marriage registration are low. Accordingly, regardless of their marriage type, few married women enjoy legal protections from the state.

Social institutions and norms influence the form of marriage contract in all societies. The teachings of religious institutions influence the acceptability of polygamy in particular. Both in DRC and Sierra Leone, Christian churches do not condone polygamy whereas Islamic family law allows a man to marry up to four wives. In the research sites in Sierra Leone the population was predominantly Muslim and no instances of Christians in polygamous marriages were identified. In the research data from DRC, it was reported that some Churches would advise men and women to leave polygamous marriages, and would not recognise such a marriage as legitimate.

2.1.2 THE CONJUGAL CONTRACT IS EMBEDDED IN WIDER SOCIAL NORMS

The terms of the conjugal contract are negotiated on an ongoing basis by spouses but are also moulded by wider social norms. While marriage is deeply embedded in religious beliefs and practices and social norms and traditions and thus contextually specific, in both DRC and Sierra Leone men are inevitably the head of the ‘household’.

This is reflected in both national laws. In DRC, a man is legally enshrined as head of the household under the Family Code 1987 and until changes in July 2016 under article 444, a wife was required to obey her husband and needed authorisation from her husband for any legal act (Sesanu Makuntima, 2016). In Sierra Leone, it is widely established that under customary marriage a husband is the head of the household and a wife is duty bound to obey him. Additionally, women are considered perpetual minors and cannot file a legal complaint without their husband’s consent (Ojukutu-Macauley 2013, 270).

In Sierra Leone a wife’s ‘obedience’ is a powerful social norm that was repeatedly mentioned by research participants and was considered to derive from both traditional and religious beliefs. The following quote provides a polygamous wife’s interpretation of this social norm:

“I got married to my husband. If I launder for him or do anything for him, I will get blessing, in this world and the next. God will bless me...my husband marries me to obey his order and if he brings me to his house anything he says, I should obey...you should obey your husband, work for him and work with him, and because we are just visitors in the world, when we die God will bless you for what you’ve done.”

(Female participant in FGD, Sierra Leone).

Women are thus legally and socially ascribed a subordinate position within the household. These wider social norms influence the bargaining positions of spouses within the conjugal contract, as they embed unequal power relations between men and women.

In both Sierra Leone and DRC, despite differences in marriage customs, a high degree of social value was placed on marriage. Within both research contexts women were found to be primarily defined by their status as a wife and mother.

For women who are not married, social judgement can be severe, particularly in rural areas. In DRC unmarried women (‘Shanga’ in Swahili) can be viewed with suspicion (Davis 2014). In Themne culture (in Sierra Leone), if a woman is unmarried when she dies a payment should be made before she can be buried within the community. Marriage also brings material benefits to spouses, and is sometimes critical to a woman’s access to basic resources. In DRC and Sierra Leone patrilineal systems of land ownership and inheritance are prevalent, and women are most likely to access land through their husbands. In some cases, this material dependence combined with the social value of marriage was found to prevent women from making decisions that might challenge a husband’s power especially when they lacked access to additional assets such as independent income or support from their wider family.
2.2 Experiences within polygamous nodes

The research reports from Sierra Leone and DRC highlighted how experiences of polygamy are shaped by complex interactions between social, economic and psychological factors. This section explores the key themes which emerged in the research reports about these experiences. Section 2.2.1 considers the basis for polygamy. Section 2.2.2 explores the (re)productive contributions of respective spouses within the conjugal contract and how the dynamics of polygamy affect these. Section 2.2.3 considers the role of a wife’s extended family in regulating the conduct of women and men within marriage. Lastly, the relationships between co-wives within the node are explored in section 2.2.4, examining how these both shape and are influenced by the terms of exchange within each conjugal contract.

2.2.1 ENTRY INTO THE NODE

Within both Sierra Leone and DRC there were a number of reasons articulated for a second or subsequent wife to be brought into the node. Primary data from both contexts revealed ‘customary bases’ for a man to take a second or third wife, with ‘customary bases’ meaning a reason that is articulated as ‘traditionally being the way’ (like any norm, these are not necessarily accepted without question, and their meaning has changed over time).

OTHER BASES WERE ALSO PROVIDED ALTHOUGH THESE WERE NOT ARTICULATED AS BASES IN TRADITION IN THE SAME WAY AS THE CUSTOMARY BASES. WITHIN BOTH SIERRA LEONE AND DRC THE BEHAVIOUR OF AN EXISTING WIFE/WIVES WAS ARTICULATED AS POTENTIAL JUSTIFICATION FOR A MAN TO MARRY ANOTHER WIFE.

- In Sierra Leone it was reported that a husband may take another wife if his existing wife is perceived to be disobedient towards him.
- In DRC it was reported that a husband may use the undesirable character or behaviour of an existing wife as justification for marrying a second wife.

In the context of DRC this was not articulated as a customary norm and incurred judgment socially. In both contexts this base is distinguished from the others because it stems from the perceived ‘behaviour’ of an existing wife and can be used as part of the armoury of ‘threat’ that a husband can hold over his wife/wives: that if she does not act in a certain way then he will bring another wife into the node. This base exemplifies the unequal terms of the conjugal contract, and the way in which control can be exerted over women within societies where polygamous marriages are common.

Another base which was reported in both Sierra Leone and DRC but did not have the same foundation in culture was extra-marital relations between a husband and another woman that were subsequently formalised, sometimes following an unplanned pregnancy. In DRC this was especially associated with the shift in socio-economic circumstances as men migrated to work in mines located far from their communities. Additionally in DRC this base can translate into less than clear terms for new wives and can make it difficult for her to establish a firm footing in the marriage. For example, bride price may not be paid (at least not initially), and she may find it difficult to assert herself in the face of a dominant and secure first wife. Such factors can lead her to be more vulnerable to neglect, violence and abandonment.

6. Children are highly valued in both contexts, and in many cases are considered critical to future well-being. In many cases, a marriage without children is considered to be a source of shame.
All of the customary and non-customary bases reflect the unequal power balance between men and women and the complementary division of resources and responsibilities which shape the gendered distribution of labour and social norms within each society. The conjugal contract is shaped by societal gender norms as well as the lived experience and daily negotiation of the terms of exchange between spouses. Inequalities in power and the perpetuation of women’s subordination within society shape the contract. Within polygamous and monogamous marriages, husbands and wives must navigate these gender-based forms of power and subordination.

2.2.2 The (Re)Productive Contributions of Respective Spouses

Polygamy has a structuring effect on productive activities and resource allocations within and across the node. Both husbands and wives are expected to contribute towards the productive and reproductive activities of the node. Within DRC and Sierra Leone the husband is supposed to provide his wives with a place to live, access to agricultural land, and assistance to farm this land, as well as cash for medical bills, and school fees. Moreover, polygamy is conceptually constructed around the principle of equity where it is socially expected that the husband will equally partition time and resources between wives. However, when a husband enters into a second or subsequent marriage, this is likely to affect his resource and time contributions to existing wives. These dynamics are explored below by looking at access to land and produce within the node, and contribution of incomes earned by husbands and wives.

Access to land and produce

Access to land for wives in polygamous unions was different in DRC and Sierra Leone. Land access was informed by the segmentation of nodes within DRC while in Sierra Leone nodes cohabit within a dwelling; these differences were important in shaping women’s access to and autonomy over agricultural produce. These experiences are explored separately below to highlight key differences.

DRC

The majority of wives interviewed in DRC had their own dwellings in separate locations and were provided by their husbands with an individual plot of land to farm. The husbands were expected to provide equal assistance to each wife’s farmland. This could take the form of his physical labour or the hiring of day labourers. The accounts provided by research participants however reveal a more complex picture: some wives reported consistent and equitable provision of support, whereas others described contributions as ad-hoc.

Within their plots women were found to exercise relatively high levels of control over the portion of the harvest allocated for daily consumption. One of the determining factors in a woman’s autonomy over any surplus harvest – that is the harvest not needed for daily consumption - was the frequency of her husband’s presence. If her husband was away most of the time then she would exercise relative autonomy over allocation of this produce; otherwise, a women’s autonomy is limited. Generally it was understood that what was grown individually by each wife was for their use, as well as for their husband and children but not for their co-wives. As one woman explained:

“While a husband is entitled to a share of the harvest, the harvest of one wife should never be used to solve the problems of another.” (Female participant in FGD, DRC).

At the same time if a husband is entitled to a share, or if a wife is not able to influence decision making around what to do with the excess, then she may not have influence over whether it goes to another wife or not.

I harvested some sweet potato. The husband came along and said, give some to the other wife. I said no way. That day there was a huge fight. He took the sweet potato by force. (ibid).

Sierra Leone

In research sites in Sierra Leone, the polygamous node was most likely to own or rent one piece of agricultural farmland collectively. This land is collectively farmed by all spouses, and the harvest is pooled and subsequently divided. The husband, as the head of the household, exercised high levels of control over the use of produce cultivated on this land; the wives reported that the harvest was always given to the husband and that he would then decide how to distribute it between dietary consumption, sale, and any distribution to co-wives. The wives often try to influence the husband’s decision but he makes the final choice as the following quote demonstrates:
Interviewer: After harvest what do you do with the produce, who decides when to sell?
Marie: Well after the harvest we hand over the proceeds to the husband, he said that he is in control of the resources and anything we need we should ask him. If the rice is not much and he wants to sell, I will advise him not to sell so that we will not lack food.
Interviewer: Does your husband listen to you?
Marie: Yes, sometimes, but sometimes he doesn’t.
(In-depth interview with Marie, Sierra Leone.)

The specific way in which the resources from the farm are distributed within the node is unique to each node, although patterns and trends emerge from participants’ accounts of daily life which point to three general modes of initial resource distribution of the harvest from the husband to the wives:

1) The produce is distributed (by the husband or first wife) on a daily basis for cooking the rest is kept by the husband, or;

2) The harvest is divided by the husband into two portions, one for the wives, sometimes controlled by the first wife, and another to pay for large household expenses, such as children’s education; or;

3) The husband divides the produce and/or profit between the wives and they must use their individual share for all of their expenses.

As the first two types of distribution indicate it was not uncommon for wives to share a portion of the harvest for ‘household’ consumption, with one wife cooking for the whole node. It was reported by both men and women that a husband’s economic contributions were socially expected to be sufficient for ‘household’ consumption. However, all of the women reported that with the initial distribution, described above, their husbands did not provide sufficient contributions to sustain them and their children’s consumption needs. Wives would then have to negotiate ongoing access to any collectively produced resources, which were not directly theirs to control. Many factors influenced the bargaining power a wife had to access these resources including her perceived need, based on her access to independent income; support from her extended family; her relationship with her husband; and the number and age of her children. Once the produce initially allocated for ‘household’ consumption was exhausted the co-operation in preparing meals would end and wives would be unlikely to share additional resources with each other.

At one point in time the husband will provide for the family wherein if he happens to get four cups he will divide it among us, that is each wife will have two cups for her family but in a case wherein the husband did not provide for you everybody will have to fight for her survival. The day if I have money I prepare food for myself and my children.
(In-depth interview with Yeama, Sierra Leone)

Although there are important differences between Sierra Leone and DRC as highlighted above, in both research contexts the physical presence of her husband is an important factor in determining the level of autonomy women exercised over land and produce. When husbands were frequently absent, women were likely to exercise greater autonomy over land provided for them by their husbands.

b. Income contributions from the husband

In DRC the primary activity for many husbands is mining, which implies extended periods of time away as well as irregular and unpredictable flows of income. In Sierra Leone the primary activity for the men was reported to be farming, whereby income was most likely to come from marketing a portion of the harvest. In both contexts it was common for a husband to draw on his income to provide for family members but without revealing amounts earned. This was true whether the income was earned through labour, for example in DRC through working in the mines, or through the sale of goods.

7. This observation is not particular to polygamous nodes. Similar systems have been documented throughout West and Sub-Saharan Africa (See Raza 2013).
It’s the husband alone who sells it (coal) and he keeps the money in his pocket – he never lets us know what he gets. This is why neither I nor the first wife ever know his capital. He is the only one who knows his situation in terms of money. (In-depth interview with Noella, DRC)

He has never given me the profit we have from any business, even when we buy rice and sell and we give him the money, he will never tell you that this is what you profit, even the farm work we do after harvest we sell the produce, no one will tell you this is what we got, but we are the ones suffering. (In-depth interview with Aminata, Sierra Leone)

In both contexts the non-disclosure of a husband’s income was generally accepted by the wives as part of the terms of their conjugal contract, and those who asked about income were unlikely to be given an answer. However, this limits their ability to negotiate and the research data suggests that it fosters anxiety in relation to their co-wives due to concerns about unequal distribution between wives. In Sierra Leone, where co-wives were commonly living in the same dwelling, this anxiety was most apparent and was reported to frequently result in conflict between co-wives, as the following quote shows.

Disputes normally happen when the husband gives something to one wife without giving the other. If you give to the young one without giving to the elder, when she comes to know about it there will be a problem. If maybe they both say they have not enough money for food, then later the young wife cooks something, the elder will conclude that the husband gave her money and she will not be happy with that and they will start quarrelling. (In-depth interview with Fatmata, Sierra Leone)

It was rare for a husband’s contribution to be perceived as equitable and sufficient. The majority of wives, in both contexts, reported that there was piecemeal provision on the basis of ongoing negotiation. In DRC it was not expected that both wives and husbands would economically contribute a proportion of their individually earned income whereas in Sierra Leone insufficient provision was perceived to be a violation of the underlying obligations of the conjugal contract, as a husband was expected to provide for the consumption needs of the node. It was reported that it would be socially acceptable for a wife to break her (re) productive obligations when not provided for by her husband, as reported by one male participant, at a FGD in Sierra Leone who reported that:

When you don’t have more money to dress or satisfy your wife, during this time the wife will not take your instructions because you cannot provide for her.

However, in practice the women interviewed noted that even if a husband did not provide enough for his wife and children, his wife continued to have a duty to remain with him, obey him and hope that in the future the situation would change.

In DRC and Sierra Leone, it was common for wives as well as husbands to generate income. In DRC, some women had land provided by their biological families, others were involved in business selling goods such as flour and beer. In Sierra Leone, women mainly engaged in selling small quantities of agricultural produce such as groundnuts and palm oil, and they also cultivated small garden plots to produce additional vegetables.

In both contexts the resources of husbands and wives were not merged into one conjugal fund for the communal use of the ‘household.’ Some women disclosed their incomes to their husbands while other did not. Regardless of whether women disclosed their incomes or not, in both contexts they exercised relatively high levels of autonomy over the use of their earnings from their individual business. Women in both DRC and Sierra Leone reported using the profits from these businesses for themselves and their children’s needs and not the wider node. Just as there was resistance from wives in DRC for agricultural produce that she has harvested to be shared with co-wives, in Sierra Leone there was resistance when a husband requested that wives use their independent income to support the consumption needs of the whole node. In both contexts the wives may share some of their earnings with their husbands.

In Sierra Leone it was commonly reported that husbands would ask their wives to loan them money. The request would be as a temporary loan, as the money was generally regarded as the woman’s to spend as she wished. However, the women noted that these ‘loans’ were rarely repaid, as the following quote demonstrates.

c. Income contributions from the wives
Some (husbands) take loans from you and don’t pay you back. For some they take a loan from you and say they are going to buy something; when you ask them later they will say that as you got money in their house you should not ask for the money you gave to them on loan. (Female participant at a FGD, Sierra Leone)

In DRC in cases in which the husband was not perceived to sufficiently provide for the wives' needs, the women were more likely to keep their income to themselves and this practice seemed to be largely accepted by the husband.

My money from the chikwangue8 I look after myself. He knows my capital – he will ask sometimes for money for tobacco and I’ll give it. We don’t do any financial planning together. (In-depth interview with Atosha, DRC)

However, other wives felt an obligation to disclose their income to their husbands, even if this was not reciprocated by their husbands:

I present all my money to my husband. He does ask me questions about it. When he goes to the mines he doesn’t communicate his capital, even when I ask him he will say he has nothing. But all the same he’ll bring something to meet the needs of the family. (In-depth interview with Sara, DRC)

In Sierra Leone, women reported that it was expected that they shared the amount they earned with their husbands. Women's accounts spoke of the complexities of independent income generation in relation to its effect on a husband's contributions and navigating gender norms. They reported needing independent sources of income to supplement the insufficient contributions they received from their husbands, but also noted that women who were perceived to have acquired adequate independent resources were then at risk of receiving a smaller share of communal resources.

The husband knowing you have money will no longer support you, he will not buy you soap or kerosene, so if I have my little money I will make sure I control it properly, if he asks me for a little amount I will help him. (Female participant in FGD, Sierra Leone)

Although not directly reported this may mean that some women did not inform their husband of their total income to ensure they maintained access to contributions from the husband. Furthermore, in Sierra Leone it as reported by male and female research participants that a woman who invested too much time in her own business was likely to be criticised for neglecting her wifely duties.

She doesn’t care about her husband, she goes up and down with her money. When a man marries a woman it is for her to take care of him, but if she is not doing this, her husband is not happy, he cannot control her, she goes and comes anywhere and anytime she likes. (Female participant in FGD, Sierra Leone)

It was frequently reported that a woman who spent a lot of time on her individual business was likely to be accused of using her business as a front to engage in extra marital affairs, resulting in stigmatisation in the community. As a result of this it was widely reported by women that they would rather be perceived as a ‘good wife’ than have a successful individual business.

Despite the relatively high levels of autonomy exercised over individual income in both contexts the majority is absorbed into supporting the women and where relevant their children to meet everyday consumption needs.

2.2.3 THE ROLE OF EXTENDED FAMILY MEMBERS IN MARRIAGES

The wider family played an important role in regulating marriages in both Sierra Leone and DRC. Almost all of the women interviewed described leaving a marriage (prior ones or their current one) at one time or another by withdrawing to their parents’ house. Within each context, different motivating factors for leaving temporarily or permanently were mentioned, including:

- Neglect9
- Repeated acts of violence considered to be excessive or life threatening (DRC only)
- The entry of a new wife into the node
- Conflict with, or threats from, a co-wife or husband over the treatment of co-wives

8. Chikwangue is a paste made from manioc root – steamed over fire in banana leaf and commonly eaten with fish or meat.
9. Neglect was described by interviewees in DRC as long absences as well as failure to inform a wife’s family when she is sick. In Sierra Leone it was described as lack of financial support as well as failure to stay with a wife for the socially expected time period of 3 days per week.
In most cases the women described returning to their husband after receiving advice from their families and after their husband had paid a fine and apologised, although in some cases women reported leaving marriages permanently. However, within each context there were factors which reduce a woman’s opportunities to withdraw from a marriage and return to her familial home. These included lack of means within her own family (to support her and her dependents), pressure from her own family to remain with the husband, threats from her husband, limited social networks (leading to social isolation in everyday life), and responsibility for young children (i.e. still dependent).

In both Sierra Leone and DRC bringing up children without the support of a husband was regarded as very difficult. Therefore, although marriage was not always a lifelong commitment, it can be assumed that if a woman does leave the node then she has been pushed to her limits as the social and economic pressures to remain married are immense.

2.2.4 CO-WIFE RELATIONS

In a polygamous node, it is through her relationship with her spouse as well as her co-wives that a woman secures her present and her future. Competition over access to resources, including the husbands’ time and attention, can contribute to anxiety and tensions between co-wives as they seek to negotiate relative positions and consolidate their influence within the node. However, co-wife relations were revealed to not be limited to interactions over resources; the experiences documented in the research attest to a more complex situation based on a shared connection.

In both Sierra Leone and DRC a first wife was generally perceived to hold a privileged position relative to subsequent wives. She was regarded as the senior wife, having amassed the longest shared history with the husband. This position grants her a degree of power but the data shows her de-facto seniority status does not ensure she has greater influence. Within each research context a wife’s influence within the node was found to be fluid and not set by one determining cause but from the interaction of a variety of factors including: rank, level of family support, access to independent sources of income, age, number and sex of children.

In Sierra Leone first wives were commonly asked to distribute the husband’s contributions to the node between his co-wives. They were also usually in charge of the management of domestic duties, and distributing domestic tasks to junior wives. It was also reported that while it was likely to be accepted by co-wives if a first wife was given resources by an NGO, if a junior wife was selected over a senior one this was likely to cause conflict. However, while first wives generally held a privileged position which gave them a degree of power over their junior wives, it was the ‘favourite’ wife of the husband that was perceived to have the greatest influence within the node. While the rank of senior and junior wife/wives is fixed, the role of favourite is constantly shifting based on the husband’s current feelings, and their interaction with the wider factors noted above. The ‘favourite’ wife was believed to be given larger contributions by the husband than the other wives, which in a context of scarce resources was a source of anxiety for many of the wives interviewed.

In DRC as the majority of nodes were segmented there was less daily interaction between wives, but the privileged position of first wives was still apparent. First wives may be considered to have priority in resource allocation, such as the allocation of plots of land, or special roles within the node. In both contexts, although the privileged position of first wife was acknowledged in discussions, there were also many instances of junior wives exercising influence within the node. In both DRC and Sierra Leone, it was commonly reported that a first wife’s position can be dislodged by a junior wife and with it the first wife’s sense of security within her marriage, even if the junior wife did not actively undermine the first wife.

10. Rank refers to the order in which co-wives married their husband, and influence to the more fluid concept of social standing within the household (Ellis, 2014).
One common finding across the two contexts was that anxiety over influence compounded by the opacity of a husband’s contributions to each wife often created an atmosphere which breeds competition between wives. The anxiety can lead to mistrust and accusations by wives that their counterparts are actively trying to win favour with their husband through giving him special treatment or undermining their own relationship. This anxiety was most apparent in discussions about how a husband split his time between wives.

In Sierra Leone a husband was expected to spend three days with each wife and then rotate. As the majority of co-wives lived in the same dwelling his presence with each wife individually may be limited to sleeping and sexual arrangements. A husband’s adherence to this rule was a particular area of anxiety for many women, as a violation of it could indicate a waning of one wife’s influence. In Sierra Leone, given the shared proximity through co-habitation, a wife was generally aware of her husband’s location and sleeping arrangements; however, there was evidence of clandestine efforts to break the three day rule by having sex with another wife while maintaining the pretense of adherence to the three day rule. As the following quote shows, this was often perceived to be the direct result of a co-wife’s efforts to increase her influence as the expense of her co-wife.

Some women live in peace, but most times when it comes to having sex (with the husband) at night, that is where the problem starts. Some women will want to win the husband through cooking food regularly and pampering him, so that when it is their co-wife’s turn for the three days, the man will go and keep her company first before going to her co-wife. (Female participant in FGD, Sierra Leone)

The gender based violence programme in Sierra Leone has been influential in advocating for the introduction of the Sexual Offences Act 2011, which criminalises marital rape, and has worked to raise awareness on women’s right to refuse sexual relations with her husband. However, in a polygamous node where sex can be a resource in the fight for influence, women may be reluctant to deny her husband sex during her three days, fearing he will later snub her and she will lose influence.

In DRC the rotation after three days was also common although as the majority of nodes were segmented this time was physically spent in the different houses where wives resided. If the husband works away he might spend one night with each wife upon his return and then revert to the three day rotation programme. Just as in Sierra Leone, if a husband breaks the rule, for a reason other than work, it can be a source of tension. However, the segmented node in DRC created a greater level of opacity regarding a husband’s whereabouts than in Sierra Leone, leaving women unsure as to when her husband would come or if he had been with her co-wife.

It can happen that it’s your turn for the husband to visit and he doesn’t come. The next day he’ll come and give you the explanation that she was sick and in hospital and there was nobody to look after the house. I am going to understand if what he is telling me is true because men can also lie. (In-depth interview with Nathale, DRC).

Furthermore, the accounts show that it was not easy for a wife to question her husband about this. Some women even described incidents where they were beaten or threatened with beating for asking questions relating to his whereabouts or relationship with another wife.

In both Sierra Leone and DRC there were also concerns that a wife could use her three days to undermine her co-wife’s relationship with her husband and this could lead to tensions between co-wives or conflict between a husband and wife, as the quote below shows.

He can spend one or two days in one of the homes but when he is with me all the woman does is ‘kutupa ma jeton’ (say provocative things). When my husband is at hers it’s all good, but when he comes to me that’s when they fight. It’s really shaming and what it means is that the man doesn’t come to my place. (In-depth interview with Faida, DRC).

The accounts illustrate that while the seniority of the first wife is acknowledged as a social norm, the lived experience is complicated. Influence is not determined by one factor and can be acquired from a variety of sources. Wives are aware of the shifting nature of influence which adds another dimension to a complex relationship, sometimes generating a degree of anxiety which can shape ongoing relations between the co-wives.
The research findings reflect wider research on polygamy where co-wife relations “have been framed as lying on a scale between outright conflict, competition and cooperation” (Ellis 2014). The research data reveals an ongoing flux between the co-wives’ relations with most co-wives having some periods of cordiality and periods of open animosity. Some co-wives reported longer periods of cordiality and others high levels of open animosity but very few had entirely cordial or entirely acrimonious relations.

**CORDIALITY**

Some wives in both contexts characterised their relations with their co-wives as predominantly cordial. Within cordial relationships, there were also higher levels of cooperation between co-wives. In Sierra Leone, there were higher levels of physical proximity and thus greater scope for cooperation. This often included sharing food preparation for the entire node and looking after co-wives’ children. In DRC, where wives were not sharing the same dwelling cooperation was more limited and likely to take the form of informally caring for co-wives children.

In both contexts where there was cordiality there was also respect for the rank of the wives. This was expressed through the use of appellations simulating familial relations such as ‘big sister’ and ‘little sister’ or ‘mother’ and ‘daughter’. In some cases these terms can belie deep affection between the wives from their shared experiences and mutual support, whereas in others they may be more superficial markers of respect. The co-operation that comes with cordiality is likely to be both materially and emotionally beneficial to the co-wives. However, even where there is cordiality, deep unease can exist beneath the surface due to the enduring fear that another wife may have greater influence. This deep-seated anxiety is expressed as a lack of trust of the true intentions of a co-wife as demonstrated in the following quote:

> ...hatred could always be there since I have children so maybe we can’t love each other 100% and the husband could have more love towards me since I have children. For that reason I don’t get myself too much involved in them ... they consider my children like their own but the problem of rivals it is that you never know what is going on in the heart of another. You could be smiling through your teeth while in your heart it’s another thing.... (In-depth interview with Nathalie, DRC).

**OPEN ANIMOSITY**

Periods of acrimony were also frequently mentioned in both contexts. Some women described relations between their co-wives as commonly acrimonious, with low levels of co-operation. Others noted particular periods where this was the case. Animosity more commonly epitomises co-wife relations; while there is scope for co-operation the constant interaction between wives provides ample opportunity for quarrels to occur. Although conflict can occur in response to a range of substantial factors it was most commonly caused by the ongoing power struggle within the node for influence.

As aforementioned, a wife’s influence within the node is not fixed and changes based on many factors, including the status of other wives. One area which can cause relations between wives to shift is the entry of a new wife into the node. This event creates a period of instability as a new and not yet negotiated set of social relations is introduced into the existing structure. Often existing wives reported being worried about losing their influence and security within the marriage.

In Sierra Leone the entry of a new wife was discussed at length with wives from polygamous nodes in the FGDs. This period was described as particularly tumultuous. It was reported that co-wives who had previously had an acrimonious relationship may unite to resist a new wife from gaining too much influence. A number of accounts were also given of wives actively trying to undermine their co-wives’ position within the node in order to compel them to leave the node. The following quote demonstrates this struggle:

> When one marries your husband, she will not want your husband to look at you again, she will not want you to be at peace with your husband, she will want to control you, but if she finds out that your relationship (with your husband) is strong she will not be able to move you (out of the marriage)... Co-wives these days come with an objective, if they meet you and see you are not regarded, they will move you out. (In-depth interview with Fatmata, Sierra Leone).

In both DRC and Sierra Leone, it was clear that the conflict arising from the entry of a new wife can create long lasting animosity between wives. This appeared to be most often the case where a first wife, feeling a threat to her position, is openly hostile to a new co-wife.
Me, I can have a good heart but she can be angry with me, thinking that I have stolen her home and this often creates conflict. We are not really on good terms. She can pass here or she can start to sing about me. We don’t visit each other because she talks about me everywhere. So it’s complicated. All this hurts me, the fact that we have this husband in common. (In-depth interview with Faida, Sierra Leone).

Even in relations that were characterised as more often acrimonious than cordial there was often a degree of affinity between co-wives that is fostered through their shared membership within the node. The following quote demonstrates the importance of not reducing relations to the outward manifestation of either conflict or co-operation.

Especially when you gave birth there is nobody closer to you because she is your neighbour. If you bring jealousy and want to be the only person to benefit from the husband, you will not be able to do all that because when you give birth you need someone to care for you. Although this will only happen by building trust and not taking a co-wife for granted. In a case wherein you understand each other well you will not have a problem although there will be times when a co-wife will change her behaviour towards her co-wife...but even so you will somehow trust her because you have been together for quite some time. (In-depth interview with Fatu, Sierra Leone).

The accounts in DRC and Sierra Leone of co-wife relations demonstrate the complexity of social relations within polygamous nodes. Co-wives are connected by being part of the same node and even in DRC where they lived in separate compounds co-wives have to navigate relations with their counterparts. These relations are not static and are influenced by a wide variety of factors which can agitate underlying tensions or support cordiality and co-operation.
3. Conclusions & Recommendations

3.1 Concluding remarks

Polygamy was found to be a common type of marriage within all research sites. It was generally socially accepted, although in DRC the Catholic Church was a vocal critic. In both DRC and Sierra Leone, it was common for polygamy to consist of one man and two to three wives. One important difference observed between the two sites is living arrangements within the node. In DRC wives were more likely to live in separate dwellings whereas in Sierra Leone wives most commonly shared one dwelling with their husband and children.

The research found that although husbands and wives negotiate the terms of exchange of their conjugal contracts on an ongoing basis, the foundation of this contract is influenced by the wider gender norms and power relations within each context. Conjugal contracts are deeply embedded in the cultural, religious and economic context. Any negotiation of the terms of exchange of the conjugal contract between husbands and wives cannot be separated from these deeply contextual factors. Husbands are legally and socially considered ‘head of the household’ in a conjugal contract, situating wives in a subordinate position.

The (re)productive contributions of respective spouses are key dimensions of a conjugal contract. When a husband enters into a second or subsequent marriage this is likely to affect his resource and time contributions to existing wives.

Whether wives are segmented or co-habiting, polygamy has a structuring effect on productive activities and resource allocations within and across households. While polygamy is premised on the equitable provision of resources and a husband’s time to each wife, very few women in DRC or Sierra Leone believed this reflected their lived experience. In polygamous nodes wives must continually negotiate allocations with their husband, from a subordinate position and according to their relative bargaining power.

Co-wife relations are a distinctive dimension of polygamous unions. In a polygamous node, it is through her relationship with her spouse as well as her co-wives that a woman secures her present and her future. Wives are acutely aware that their influence within the node to negotiate their husband’s contribution and his physical presence is relative to that of their co-wives. Irrespective of a wife’s relationship with her husband, relations between co-wives are significant for her wellbeing. They can range (and change) from cordial to acrimonious, depending on a number of factors, including the degree to which the woman herself feels secure within the marriage as well as the extent to which a husband is perceived to be treating each wife equitably. While the commonly used scale of cordial to acrimonious relations largely represents the accounts given in both contexts, the complexity of relations must not be underestimated. Shared experiences often created a degree of affinity between co-wives, which could prevail even in times of conflict. Moreover underlying tensions or anxiety over the influence of another wife are likely to exist even when relations were cordial.

Women who have greater access to resources were often better able to navigate the unequal terms within the conjugal contract. Others who struggle to access these resources are more likely to feel concern or worry regarding the influence of their co-wives. Given the complexity of relations within the node, vulnerability does not correlate directly with factors such as rank or age. Ascertaining vulnerability requires in depth analysis as it is created by the interrelation of various factors such as age, gender and other social and economic differences which change over time. A woman’s empowerment or disempowerment within polygamous marriages is embedded in the social relations which shape her life and which lie within and beyond the marriage contract. Addressing factors which affect her disempowerment requires transforming the unequal power relations which limit the boundaries for negotiating the terms of the conjugal contract.
3.2 Recommendations for Trócaire programmes

1. Invest in sensitive qualitative analysis to explore social relations in polygamous unions

Polygamous nodes have specific dynamics created by the existence of multiple conjugal contracts. Not recognizing these dynamics could lead to programmes ‘doing harm’ through introducing resources which cause greater conflict between co-wives or wives and husbands. Programmes should take measures to understand the social relations prevailing within polygamous households and in the wider community and explore how these may affect programmes. The research shows that polygamy has a structuring effect on productive activity and allocations within and across households. However, these insights are not so easily gleaned through the format of structured meetings or questionnaires. While in-depth research is not always feasible, programme design and monitoring should integrate *sensitive and informed qualitative analysis* to explore the social relations within polygamous unions. The tools used in the country research could be a starting point for such research.

2. Invest in robust gender, power and vulnerability analysis

The ways in which wives in polygamous marriages navigate and experience patriarchy must be carefully analysed and understood to identify potential vulnerabilities. A strong gender and power analysis will prevent fallacious assumptions and illuminate the complex ways in which vulnerability is generated or perpetuated within marriage. It will also generate an understanding of how this vulnerability is linked to social relations within the ‘household’ and to broader family and community processes (e.g. wider family support or its absence, inheritance), as well as factors that could contribute to the empowerment of women in such contexts. The analysis should include the legal context (including regarding the permissibility of polygamy and women’s protections within it), social norms (including regarding the importance of marriage and expectations of women’s behaviours within it) and economic considerations (including the availability of resources and how they are typically owned and distributed).

3. Integrate community & household mapping into programming

The term ‘household’ is regularly used in development programming but is not clearly defined, and generates assumptions about the relations within it. The research has shown that a polygamous node may contain multiple households, where wives and their children constitute separate ‘households.’ Trócaire should consider community and household mapping as an integral part of their programming work, with the consent and awareness of programme participants and to ensure that every effort is made to mitigate potential conflict or harm. Without this kind of mapping, programme activities may unwittingly intensify competition within the node; and/or may fail to recognise that a given situation within a node may affect a woman’s desire and ability to join programme activities. This mapping should inform programme targeting as well as programme design.
4. Support enablers of women’s power

The research findings suggest a correlation between the autonomy that a woman is able to exercise within marriage and assets (for example her own business, or access to land independent of her husband). In addition the findings suggest that where a woman has support from wider family networks she will be more able to extract herself – if only temporarily - from situations of conflict or violence. For each individual context, the sources of support/empowerment should be identified and supported.

At the same time, these strategies should consider how to mitigate unintended consequences. For example, in Sierra Leone women who increased their own individual income found themselves at risk of being denied less or none of the shared node resources, which presents a risk that women increase their burden of labour but are ultimately economically less well-off. Programmes must also consider relations between spouses as well as issues of power, agency and control over resources, and aim to support transformation of inequitable power relations.

5. Mitigate harm and conflict within nodes

Relations of exchange are complicated in polygamous nodes by the addition of multiple conjugal contracts. Whilst enablers of women’s autonomy should be supported these must happen alongside strategies which mitigate any potential harm caused by providing additional resources to some members of the node and not others. The research has shown how external resources can disrupt co-wife relations, for example in Sierra Leone if a second wife was given economic support from an NGO, over a first wife, this could lead to a change in influence within the node and increased conflict. On the basis of the community and household mapping and the analysis described in recommendation 3, above, strategies to mitigate unintended harm should also be incorporated to build consensus and support between wives or to reduce/resolve conflict. Any conflict mitigation strategies should be empowering to all women in the household, while prioritising the balance of power between men and women.
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Guidelines

The standard logo for use in Ireland is:

1. The Harp to represent the State
2. The title
3. The subtitle

If producing communications As Gaeilge, Irish versions of the two main variations of the logo exist. The Guidelines for usage of the Irish versions of the logo are the same as for the English versions.