UNDERSTANDING WOMEN’S LIVES IN POLYGAMOUS MARRIAGES: EXPLORING COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES IN SIERRA LEONE
This report was authored by Emma Newbury as part of the overall research project carried out by Emma Newbury and Sive Bresnihan of Newstone Global Consulting (www.newstoneglobal.com).
## Contents

### Acknowledgements

PAGE 2

### Executive summary

PAGE 3

### 1. Background to the Research Report

1.1 Conceptual framework and methodology

PAGE 7

1.2 Methodology

PAGE 8

1.3 Research sites

PAGE 10

### 2. Findings

2.1 The conjugal contract

PAGE 12

2.2 Access to collective resources within the node

PAGE 16

2.3 Co-wife relations

PAGE 22

2.4 Well-being

PAGE 25

### 3. Conclusions

PAGE 29

### 4. Recommendations

4.1 Invest in robust gender, power and vulnerability analysis

PAGE 30

4.2 Ensure that programming responds to power imbalance

PAGE 30

4.3 Target appropriately

PAGE 31

4.4 Monitoring and evaluation

PAGE 31

### Bibliography

PAGE 32
Acknowledgements

DEEPEST THANKS TO:

Trócaire staff including Carol Wrenn, Karen Murphy, Deirdre Ni Cheallaigh, Michael Solis, Ella Syl-Macfoy, Florie de Jager Meezenbroek, Mohamed Turay and Yalamba Koroma.

The women and men of Foredugu, Robomp, Masherie Thenkle and Kaserie Mathathoi who engaged with this project and shared their stories so generously.

External academic advisor Ulrike Schultz.

And to the gifted members of the research team:

Precious Lebby and Annette Isatu Kamara (associate researchers), Florence Sesay (CDHR), Mohamed Kargbo (AAD), Zainab Bangura, and Alimamy Bangura (KADDRO). With support from Joseph U Sesay (CDHR) and Lansana Sesay (AJLC).

Trócaire gratefully acknowledges support received from the Government of Ireland through Irish Aid and from MISEREOR for its international programming and research.

The ideas, comments and recommendations contained herein are entirely the responsibility of the author(s) and do not represent or reflect the policy of Irish Aid or Misereor.
This research report on polygamy is part of a wider project undertaken by Trócaire in 2016 to better understand the practice and experiences of polygamy in communities in which Trócaire works. The report details the findings for research undertaken in Sierra Leone in the districts of Port Loko and Kambia from July to October 2016. The research had 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.

The 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.

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.

The methodology was conducted over three phases using a combination of three primary data collection tools: key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FDGs) and in-depth interviews. In total, approximately 175 people participated in the research. The research was primarily carried out in four communities across the two districts: Foredugu and Robump in Port Loko district; and, Masherie Thenkle and Kaserie Mathathoi in Kambia district.

Summary of key findings

1. Unequal power relations define division of labour and decision-making power within marriage, as well as the formation of the polygamous union itself.

Marriage is widely considered to be an important aspect of adulthood in Sierra Leone, endowing specific social status to women, as well as access to land and property. Polygamy is recognised as a form of marriage in customary law and all registered customary marriage are legally recognized under statute law granting polygamous spouses the same rights as those in monogamous marriages. Polygamy is a common form of marriage in Port Loko and Kambia; within the four research communities it was reported to be the most common form of marriage with each node typically comprising two or three wives. In the majority of cases, all wives lived in the same dwelling.

There are two fundamental norms which were found to underpin the conjugal contract:

- A husband has the responsibility to provide for the economic needs of the node
- A wife in turn must obey her husband and support him in these economic endeavours

These responsibilities influence the distribution of power between a husband and wife/wives within the home. They position women in a subordinate position in which they are dependent on men to provide for their needs, which in turn places them in an unequal bargaining position regarding the exchange of goods, incomes and services, including labour, within the household.
There were a number of reasons cited by male participants for marrying a second or subsequent wife. The main reasons given were:

- To provide extra labour for the node
- A response to a situation in which a wife has not given birth to any children
- To have many children
- A response to a situation in which an existing wife/wives is/are deemed not to be obeying their husband

Customary practice dictates that a husband must inform his existing wife/wives in advance of introducing a new wife into the node. Although their permission is usually sought, women lack bargaining power to stop the new marriage from happening. Women can take action once the marriage has been contracted such as leaving the marital home or trying to remove the new wife but this is likely to cause them emotional distress and endanger their material well-being as they are highly dependent on men for access to land and property.

2. Allocation of resources is linked to power relations within the node.

Within a polygamous node, resources are obtained by wives primarily through the farm land owned or rented by their husband. All wives and husband that participated in this study engage in agricultural production of crops on this land unless physically disabled. The husband, designated as the head of the household, makes all decisions about this land, from what crop to grow to the distribution of labour on a daily basis, to the selling of the produce. Once the distribution of the harvest has occurred the wives will then need to negotiate ongoing access to any collective resources, which have not been given directly to them to control.

Beyond the consumption of food there is minimal communal use of collective resources. The wives that participated in the study reported using the money or produce that was given to them, or that they earned individually only for the well-being of themselves and their children rather than for the whole node. This creates a specific form of competition within polygamous households, as wives compete for access to communal resources for themselves and their children. This competition is exacerbated in a context of scarce resources; all of the women interviewed reported that their husbands were unable to fully provide for their economic needs. Although it was culturally acceptable for women to negate their duties of obedience when a husband was unable to provide, most women instead chose to accept the situation and find alternative sources of income to supplement their husband’s contributions.
age, number and/or sex of children, and perceived obedience of a woman to her husband. The main reason given by men for favouring one wife over another was her level of obedience. Obedience is considered to be one of the most fundamental qualities of a wife in Sierra Leone, meaning that all negotiation for resources must be achieved without it being perceived as insubordination. The competition for a husband’s favour leads in many cases to a high level of mistrust between co-wives.

There is an ongoing flux between the co-wives’ relations, ranging from periods of open animosity to periods of cordial relations. Cordiality is likely to provide the additional bonus of high levels of support in domestic duties and child care. However, there are a number of common themes which can inflame anxieties and cause simmering tension to erupt into conflict between co-wives. The majority of these are closely related to the ongoing struggle for influence within the node, and are linked to:

A. Husband’s unequal treatment of wives (often regarding resources)
B. The introduction of a new wife
C. Conflict between the co-wives’ children
D. A husband not splitting his time evenly between wives

When there is conflict between the co-wives the levels of cooperation vis-à-vis household division of labour is reduced. For example ‘junior’ wives may rebel against the instructions of the first wife or normal privileges associated with cooperation, such as provision of child care for one another, are withdrawn.

As noted, women are reliant on men for access to assets and collective resources and must bargain for their share of these resources. Some women are in a better position to influence the distribution of resources than others but all wives rely on access to individually acquired resources to ensure the well-being of themselves and their children. Three types of resources emerged throughout the study which women rely on for survival, security and autonomy:

1) Access to individual income
2) Groups membership
3) Support from their parents

Women’s individual income, usually derived from selling agricultural products or through their engagement with savings and loans groups, is a critical resource as it allows women the means to persevere when collective resources are insufficient. However, when women amass substantial amounts of money (or are perceived to), they are likely to be allocated less of the household resources by their husband. Thus, women must delicately balance their claim to an allocation of household resources with their success at attaining an independent source of income.

Another form of support, which women can draw on in times of conflict or insecurity, is derived from their relationship with their biological families. It emerged from the data that women would often return to their parents’ home when there was a serious problem with their husband or co-wife. Typically this was a temporary measure until the problem in question was resolved. The wives’ parents/extended family play an important role in mediating between the husband and wife during such periods. By removing themselves from the martial home and returning to their maternal home, women use the available support networks they have access to to increase their bargaining position.
Summary of recommendations for programming in polygamy-prevalent communities in Sierra Leone

1. **Invest in robust gender, power and vulnerability analysis**

Programmes must invest in robust gender, power and vulnerability analysis to understand the ways in which gender norms and power relations are mediated in polygamous unions.

- Robust gender and vulnerability analyses will help avoid assumptions about the meaning of ‘household’ and power relations within it, and will make evident the complexity of social relations in communities.
- A robust analysis that addresses these social-relations within target communities and ‘households’ can help to ensure that programmes respond to varying household and marital arrangements – including polygamy - and how power relations play out within them.
- The analysis should also test the assumption that a female headed household is more vulnerable than a male headed household.

2. **Ensure that programming responds to power imbalance**

Within a node, the findings clearly demonstrate that power is fluid and relational, and that ultimate power lies with a husband who can exert control through norms of obedience.

- Economic empowerment and livelihoods programmes must go beyond providing women with additional resources only since this risks des-responsibilising of husbands, while increasing a women’s burden of labour without corresponding gains. 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.
- Programming which provides women with information on their rights must mitigate the risks associated with women’s attempts to claim those rights, including a backlash in the home or community resulting in violence or further disempowerment.

3. **Target appropriately**

- Any assumption that supporting one member of the ‘household’ is likely to lead to prosperity for all the ‘household’ must be reviewed and interrogated.
- Targeting one wife in a polygamous node may affect the complex balance (or imbalance) of power between co-wives. Strategies to mitigate unintended harm should be incorporated, including for example to build consensus and support between wives or to reduce/resolve conflict.

4. **Tailor monitoring and evaluation tools**

Programmes should take into account the potential prevalence of polygamy within monitoring and evaluation tools.

- Demographics questions should include questions about polygamy. These could be as simple as asking a woman how many co-wives she has and asking a man how many wives he has.
- Indicators which measure change at a household level must define what is meant by a household and ensure that it is consistently conveyed in monitoring and evaluation tools.
- Introducing resources into a polygamous node could alter the complex power struggle for position and influence. It is therefore important to track changes in power relations between co-wives, and between men and women, as a result of programme interventions.
This research report on polygamy is part of a wider project undertaken by Trócaire in 2016 to better understand the practices and experiences of polygamy in communities where Trócaire is working. 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.

In May 2016, Trócaire engaged Newstone Global Consultancy to carry out the research in conjunction with Trócaire’s country teams and partner organisations’ staff. The two focus countries selected were Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The specific aims of the field research were agreed as follows:

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.

The following report outlines key findings of field research carried out in Sierra Leone, in the Port Loko and Kambia districts, during the months of July and October 2016. Section 1 presents the conceptual framework and methodology applied; section 2 presents the research findings, describing the form that the conjugal contract takes in the research sites, and within those contracts, how collective resources are accessed, what form co-wife relations take, and women’s ability to access individual resources to increase their well-being. Sections 3 and 4 present the overarching conclusions and recommendations for programming in Sierra Leone.

1.1 Conceptual framework and methodology

1.1.1 SOCIAL RELATIONS APPROACH

The research applies a social relations approach (Kabeer 1994), which provides a way to conceptualise gender relations and examine how they determine men and women’s respective access to resources, responsibilities, attributes, capabilities, power and privilege within the household sphere and beyond. It provides the conceptual foundation for this research project, which focuses on the practice and experiences of polygamy in localities within the two northern districts of Sierra Leone: Port Loko and Kambia.

The social relations approach is a ‘subject sensitive’ approach to data gathering and analysis, emphasising people’s accounts of their everyday experiences, averting the tendency to examine men and women as isisolable 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,

---

1. 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 Sierra Leone.

2. See section 1.1.2 below.
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).

1.1.2 KEY CONCEPTS

Several concepts underpin the 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 employed the concept of conjugal contract (Whitehead 1981), defined as the ‘terms on which husbands and wives exchange goods, incomes and services, including labour, within the household’ (ibid, 88). This concept acknowledges that a marriage contract is not simply an externally generated ‘structure of control’ but rather the product of a multitude of daily actions which either reinforce or undermine it. Moreover, reproduction of such a contract is not automatic but the outcome of the everyday making of its meaning by women and men; it can be articulated differently by different actors, and can change over time (Jackson 1995).

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

1.2 Methodology

The conceptual foundation outlined above was intrinsic to the research methodology; it guided the design of the inquiry and the process itself, which was iterative and based on phases of data gathering, analysis and reflection.

1.2.1 DATA COLLECTION

The research was conducted by four locally-based partner organisations working with Trócaire in Sierra Leone: Action for Advocacy and Development (AAD), Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (CDHR), Access to Justice Law Centre (AJLC) and Kambia District Development and Rehabilitation Organization (KADDRO). Staff from these organisations were accompanied by the lead researcher and a local researcher.

The primary research was principally carried out in two districts in Northern Sierra Leone: Port Loko and Kambia. Within these districts, four communities were selected.

A. Port Loko: Foredugu and Robump

B. Kambia: Masherie Thenkle and Kaserie Mathathoi

These communities were chosen by the partner organisations involved in the research due to the organisations’ experience in delivering a variety of development and humanitarian services and support in the two districts. The communities were chosen using a participatory ranking exercise, which analysed factors such as ethnic and socio-economic diversity. Given the need to collect in-depth information in a relatively short period, the research relied on already established relationships with communities developed by the partner organisations. These relationships, and their familiarity with the communities involved, enabled the partners to identify potential research participants. It was understood that this process had the potential to introduce specific forms of bias, as the partners were known in the communities for providing goods and services, which may have
influenced participants’ desire to participate in the research. To minimise this bias, the research team explained in detail the purpose of the research, and participants were informed that no material benefits would arise from participating.

The research used a purely qualitative methodology aiming to elicit the breadth of experiences of polygamy. The research used four different types of data collection methods:

1. **Desk review of relevant literature**
2. **Key informant interviews (KIIs)**
3. **Focus group discussions (FDGs)**
4. **In-depth interviews**

The field work was divided into three distinct phases. The first two phases of data collection were conducted during July 2016 and the third phase in October 2016. In total, primary data was collected from 183 people over a period of 6 weeks.

A findings workshop was held in January 2017 with 45 participants representing Trócaire’s partner organisations, including those that participated in data collection.

**Phase one:** This phase comprised secondary and primary data collection. An initial desk-based document review was conducted, to analyse the context of polygamy within Sierra Leone. It considered:

- The legal status of polygamy
- Forms of polygamy
- Prevalence of polygamy and how the practice differs across regions, religions and ethnic groups within the specific contexts
- Official policies and programmes which affect polygamous households

To augment this literature review, interviews were conducted with 7 key informants from NGOs and the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children’s Affairs as well as local chiefs from two of the communities chosen for the in-depth research. These interviews were conducted in Freetown, Port Loko and Kambia. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide in order to standardise the format and content of the interviews and reduce potential biases and interviewer effects. Additionally, 7 FGDs were held with community leaders from each of the four communities and the Family Support Unit (FSU) in Kambia. Each followed a FGD guide. In total, approximately 85 people participated in this initial phase. The analysis from this phase was shared with the research team and on that basis the criteria for the identification of participants for in-depth interviews were created.

3. **Focus group discussions (FDGs)** are part of the Criminal Investigation Department of the Sierra Leone Police and are tasked to deal primarily with physical and sexual assault and cruelty to children.
4. See annex for this and additional tools cited below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Methods used</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase one</td>
<td>FGDs KIIs</td>
<td>8 FGDs were conducted with community leaders in all four principal communities. Approximately 60 people participated in these. 2 FGDs were conducted with the Family Support Unit (FSU) and the United Centre for Human Rights (a local NGO). 18 people participated in these. 7 KIIs were conducted with experts from NGOs and the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children’s Affairs in Freetown, Kambia Town and Port Loko. Local chiefs from two of the chosen communities were also interviewed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase two</td>
<td>In-depth interviews</td>
<td>39 in depth interviews were conducted: - 26 with 1st, 2nd and 3rd wives - 8 with husbands - 5 with extended family members of the wives and husbands interviewed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase three</td>
<td>FGDs</td>
<td>8 FGDs conducted (2 in each of the four communities) - 34 1st wives participated - 25 2nd/3rd wives participated</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The criteria ensured that participants in the research group represented a diversity of rural versus urban locations, were of different age groups, and were of differing rank in the case of wives (first, second, third wife). 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.

**Phase two:** The analysis from phase one was used to create an in-depth interview guide. This guide utilised the social relations approach to understand the ways in which people gain power through rules, resources, people & activities. As the table above shows, 39 in-depth interviews were conducted with husbands, wives and their extended family members.

**Phase three:** Phase two provided an in-depth picture of the ways in which resources affect gender relations at the household level. In order to ensure that these findings were reflective of the experiences of others within polygamous households, the findings were used to develop a *story probe* for discussion at group level (with respondents who were not involved in in-depth interviews). The story was developed collaboratively with the research team and it aimed to further uncover relations between co-wives. Therefore, FGDs were conducted separately with first wives; second and third wives jointly participated in FGDs as there were insufficient numbers of third wives to conduct separate FGDs. This story was used as a probe to verify the data from the in-depth interviews. In total 8 FGDs were conducted with 59 participants.

**Findings workshop:** Following data collection and analysis, a research workshop was conducted to facilitate partners’ reflections on the appropriateness of existing strategies to support and promote gender equality in polygamous families and communities. Key findings were explored with Trócaire’s partner organisations and staff to further validate the data. Additionally, draft recommendations were used to reflect on programme strategies and develop new strategies to be integrated into the programme.

**1.2.2 ANALYSIS**

The first phase KIIs were conducted in English or Krio; all FGDs and in-depth interviews were conducted in Krio or Themne, depending on the language preference of the interviewee; and all of the FGDs, in-depth interviews and KIIs were digitally recorded. Those conducted in English were transcribed by the consultant. The remainder were translated and simultaneously transcribed into English by hired transcribers. While the transcribers were asked to translate the interviews precisely, quality checks detected low quality with the initial transcriptions, with much of the original recording being presented in summary form only. In response to this, a new transcriber was recruited for all subsequent data collection, in addition to reviewing and editing the previous transcriptions.

An initial analysis of the findings of each phase was conducted by the research team before embarking on the next phase, to enable the iterative development of the research process and ensure findings were contextualised. The findings were discussed and their links to the concepts of the social relations approach were considered. The contextual insights of the partners and Trócaire staff shared during these discussions were used to inform the in-depth analysis conducted by the lead researcher.

Following the transcription of all the audio data, the lead researcher conducted a qualitative analysis of all the interviews and FGDs using the qualitative software programme Nvivo. The data were coded and categorised with a view to identifying commonly emerging themes.

To ensure that the research adheres to the principles of voice and inclusion, the findings are illustrated with direct quotes from research participants. In-depth interviews are attributed to a specific individual to allow readers to understand and empathise with their experiences, although all names have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

**1.3 RESEARCH SITES**

The field data was primarily gathered in four communities in the districts of Port Loko and Kambia:

- Port Loko: Foredugu and Robump
- Kambia: Masherie Thenkle and Kaserie Mathathoi

![Map of communities](image)
The population of Sierra Leone is predominately Muslim, but there is also a sizeable Christian community. The communities chosen were predominately Muslim; thus, the research focuses on polygamy within traditional and Islamic populations in Sierra Leone. Sierra Leone is also an ethnically diverse country with an estimated 16-20 different ethnic groups. Within Northern Province where the research was conducted, the largest ethnic group is Themne.

1.3.1 PORT LOKO

Port Loko is in the Northern Province and is the second most populous district in Sierra Leone. The largest ethnic group in the area is Theme and around 80% of the population is Muslim (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2015). Production of food crops, such as rice, cassava and sweet potato, are the main livelihood sources for over 80% of the population. The district has high levels of poverty: “(t)he Wealth Index (WI) indicates that 26% of the district population falls into the poorest quintile, while 33% fall under a medium poor rating” (ibid). There are 11 chiefdoms in the district: Bureh Kasseh Makonteh (BKM), Buya Romende, Dibia, Kaffu Bullom, Koya, Lokomasama, Maforki, Marampa, Masimera, Sanda Magbolontor, and Tinkatupa Makonteh Safroko.

The two communities in Port Loko selected to participate in the research were Robump and Foredugu. Robump is a rural remote village with approximately 36 houses where most families are engaged in farming and the dominant ethnic group is Themne. Foredugu is a peri-urban area, with one of the largest markets serving the surrounding areas. It contains hundreds of houses and the population make their living mainly from small businesses selling food products and farming. The community is ethnically mixed; the dominant ethnic group is Themne and other ethnic groups include Limba, Susu and Fula.

1.3.2 KAMBIA

Kambia District is in the Northern Province, bordering the Republic of Guinea which provides a vital trade route between the two countries. The district 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. Port Loko district also has high levels of poverty: “(t)he Wealth Index (WI) indicates that 43% of the district households are in the two poorest quintiles” (ibid). The district is divided into seven chiefdoms: Masherie Thenkle is in Magbema chiefdom and Kaserie Mathathoi is in Tonko Limba chiefdom.

The two communities selected from Kambia were Masherie Thenkle and Kaserie Mathathoi. Masherie Thenkle is a rural village with approximately 85 houses. The dominant ethnic group is Themne and the residents primarily engage in farming activities, with the main crop being rice. Kaserie Mathathoi is located on one of the main roads to Kambia and has relatively good access to the bigger markets through the passing taxis and buses. It was estimated there are approximately 100 dwellings in the community and the main ethnic group is Limba. As in Masherie Thenkle, the main economic activity in Kaserie Mathathoi is the farming of rice, although it is also common to grow and process groundnuts and palm nuts.

Production of food crops, such as rice, cassava and sweet potato, are the main livelihood sources for over 80% of the population of Port Loko.

---

5. The 2015 census record that the population is 614,063.
6. There are over 15 different ethnic groups in Sierra Leone. The Themne tribe is the largest ethnic group and are most prominent in the Northern region of Sierra Leone.
2. Findings

The research findings have been organised into two sections. Section 2.1 builds a picture of the conjugal contract within these settings, and contextualises polygamous unions within these wider dynamics. Sections 2.2 to 2.4 considers how collective resources are distributed within the polygamous node, explores co-wife relations, and considers how women are able to access individual resources to increase their well-being.

2.1 The conjugal contract

This section explores the contextual basis of conjugal contracts within the communities studied, and contextualises polygamous unions within these wider dynamics. It analyses the legal and cultural contexts of marriages within the communities under study and then explores the underlying norms which shape the terms for exchange within the conjugal contract.

2.1.1 THE LAW UNDERPINNING THE CONJUGAL CONTRACT

Sierra Leone is a pluralistic legal system embracing general law, customary law and Islamic law. Customary law is defined in the Local Courts Act 1963 as “any rule, other than a rule of “general law” having force in any of the chiefdom of the provinces whereby rights and correlative duties have been acquired or imposed.” Within this pluralistic system there are different statutes which govern marriage:

- **Christian Marriage Act**
- **Civil Marriage Act**
- **Muslim Marriage Act**

Under the Christian and Civil Marriage Acts polygamy in any form is not recognized. Under the Muslim Marriage Act, in accordance with Islamic law a man can have up to four wives. Customary law also allows polygamy; a man can marry as many wives as he desires. Since 2007 this customary right has been enshrined in statute law through the Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act. Marriages, whether polygamous or monogamous, that are recognized under customary law can be registered and are protected by the general laws which endow rights to spouses, such as the provisions of the Devolution of Estates Act 2007. This act states that all spouses are entitled to a share of their partner’s property, if they die intestate.

The Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act also gives the legal status of spouse to those who have been co-habiting for more than five years. Therefore any woman who has been married under customary law or co-habiting with a partner for more than five years gains the legal rights of a spouse, including inheritance rights.

It is important to note that even though the Devolution of Estates Act provides substantial legal rights regarding inheritance, a person who has been co-habiting for less than five years will only be considered a spouse if his/her marriage was registered with the local council. However, key informants at the Ministry for Social Welfare, Gender and Children’s Affairs reported that across the provinces only a small proportion of customary marriages (polygamous or monogamous) have been registered since 2007. Additionally, none of the
women interviewed during the research process reported that their marriage was registered. These marriages (where co-habitation is less than five years) therefore remain unrecognised under the law and can not avail of the legal protection for spouses, including inheritance.

### 2.1.2 CUSTOMARY MARRIAGE

Marriage is very important to a woman’s social status in the communities reviewed. In Themne culture, if a woman is unmarried when she dies, the right to bury her in the community must be paid for. Being a “good wife” is assumed locally to bring “blessings” from God to the wife and her children.

When you die people will talk about it that you were a very obedient wife; that’s why your children are blessed. (Female participant, FGD with first wives in Foredugu)

Married women have greater authority and respect in the community than single women. Historically a customary marriage would have been an arranged marriage. According to the data collected, directly contracted marriages are now more common than arranged marriages, with estimates of only around 40% of marriages being arranged. Under customary law, marriage requires the consent of the intended-wife’s family; therefore the role of the extended family has not entirely disappeared from marriages. Even if the marriage is not officially an arranged marriage, the family members are often involved in selecting or suggesting suitable partners, as the following extract from an interview with a husband shows.

The second one came here as a lactating mother and her husband had just died at Rogbalan. She was (visiting) here and my mother was also here doing some small business, selling tobacco. It was then that my mother saw her and told me about her... It was then that I called the woman and asked for her consent. She said if I have agreed to marry her, she too is willing to marry to me. (In-depth interview with Solomon Kamara, Robump)

The engagement process described by the interviewees (both men and women) commonly referred to a woman initially being noticed by a man, who then approached her or her family to ask for her hand in marriage, and if the woman consented the marriage was organised.

I was living with my father and my husband saw me and decided to marry me, I did not agree with him at first because it was not easy to leave my father’s house but later I arrived here and somehow I had enough courage. (In-depth interview with Zainab Bangura, first wife, Kaserie Mathathoi)

However, there were also a number of examples of couples that were in a relationship for a period of time before they were married and only undertook a marriage process after the women became pregnant. A customary marriage in Sierra Leone can differ from area to area depending on tribal norms and customs. However, there are some common practices. ‘Bride price’ is a longstanding practice in Sierra Leone across many of the tribes including Mende, Limba and Theme (Murdock 1959, 262). The bride price is paid to the family of the wife, although bride service is also common, where services are given in lieu of economic payment (McFerson 2012, 56).

The payment of a kola, monetary consideration for the woman’s hand in marriage, is usually distributed among the wife’s family and, in the event of a divorce, should be returned to the husband. (Davies 2005, 19)

Although bride price is culturally an essential part of the marriage process, a number of men and women that participated in the in-depth interviews reported that no bride price had been paid. There were also unions where no form of ceremony had taken place but both parties still regarded themselves as husband and wife. There were a number of examples where following a marriage proposal, the couple lived as husband and wife for several years before officially marrying. There was no discernible distinction in social status or perceived rights for those wives who had been officially married through traditional ceremonies and the payment of bride price, and those who had not. None of the interviewees reported feeling less secure or inferior to co-wives who had gone through the traditional marriage rights with their husbands.

---

7. In the case of divorce if a woman is still considered to be of child bearing age then she would be expected to find another husband.

8. No reasons were given for this practice; however, staff members of partner organisations spoke about the social pressure for men and women to marry if a pregnancy occurred.
2.1.3 POLYGAMOUS MARRIAGE

Polygamous marriage was very commonplace in the research sites and in general is prevalent in Sierra Leone. According to official statistics from the Demographic Health Survey of 2013, Kambia had the highest rate of polygamy in the country, where 46% of women had no co-wives, 40% had one co-wife and 13% had two or more. Port Loko had the third highest rate of polygamy with 34% of women reporting one co-wife and 13% two or more.

The research findings also found that a polygamous node with two wives was most common, although it was not unusual to have up to three wives within one node. However, in the research communities the rates of polygamy were reported to be much higher than the official statistics report, with estimates of 70-80% of unions being polygamous. Although the sample is too small to make generalisations about wider population trends, it is interesting to note that polygamy was common among both older and younger generations, suggesting that this type of marriage remains popular despite wider socio-economic changes.

It was most common to have all of the wives of the node residing under one roof, although there were two incidents of wives living in separate dwellings reported in the in-depth interviews. This physical proximity means there is a high degree of physical interaction between the wives. It was reported that the social norm is for the husband to spend three nights with each wife, and then rotate. It was reported that the splitting of time between wives was a rule dictated by Islam and the only time it would vary was when a woman is breastfeeding or menstruating.

2.1.4 NORMS WHICH UNDERPIN EXCHANGE WITHIN THE CONJUGAL CONTRACT

The (re)productive contributions of respective spouses are key dimensions of any conjugal contract which, as noted, signifies the “terms on which husbands and wives exchange goods, incomes and services, including labour, within the household” (Whitehead, 1981, 80). There are implicit rules which underpin the roles and responsibilities within the conjugal contract and affect the terms of that contract. There are two fundamental implicit responsibilities which emerged from the data:

A. The husband has the responsibility to provide for the economic needs of the node

It was reported in FGDs that a husband is the head of the household and it is his responsibility to provide for the household.

“I tell them what each one is supposed to do, the responsibility of feeding and other basic needs in the homes is my responsibility, it lies on my head, and I am not asking anyone to feed her companion.” (In-depth interview with Issa Sesay, husband, in Foredugu)

According to Islamic and customary law a man should only be allowed to marry a second or subsequent wife if he is able provide equally for them. Therefore the responsibility to provide under the conjugal contract does not alter within a polygamous node.

B. The wife in turn must obey the husband and support him in these economic endeavours

“I am the man. I have the last say. When I told her I was going to marry her, she accepts she will look up to me and listen to me.” (In-depth interview with Solomon Kamara, husband, Robump)

In an interview with a local chief it was noted that disobedience was considered a basis for inflicting physical violence:

“If one of my wives will disrespect me, and if I do not think twice I will want to lose my temper and beat her, it happens.” (Interview with local Chief, Foredugu)

These responsibilities influence the distribution of power between a husband and wife within the home. Women are traditionally in a subordinate position and are dependent on men to provide for their needs, situating them in an unequal bargaining position regarding the exchange of goods, incomes and services, including labour, within the household.

Under the conjugal contract a wife (whether part of a polygamous node or not) is regarded as inferior to the husband, and can even be considered part of his property (Davies, 2005).
It was noted in the Truth and Reconciliation Report (2004) “…That the payment of bride price, in fact, confers on the husband total control over the wife as her trustee, guardian and protector, and the wife automatically assumes a lower status in the home. Indeed, within customary law, the wife is viewed at par as a minor” (cited in McFerson, 2012, 57).

In most literature addressing gender norms within Sierra Leone, no distinction is made between polygamous and monogamous marriage; however, in either marriage a woman is deemed inferior and her husband is deemed the head of the household. The basis of the conjugal contract places women as dependent on men for their economic needs. Women are also reliant on their husbands for access to assets such as land due to the traditional patrimonial system of land ownership. Authors have described the impact that this power imbalance has on decisions regarding proceeds from land and agriculture, noting that wives have no say or any expectation to have influence over the proceeds from land sale or use, which “limits both the access women have to the process of decision making and their ability to control any of the economic benefits” (Millar, 2015, 454). The sections that follows below (sections 2.2 to 2.4) explore how the norms which underpin the conjugal contract are experienced in, and shape, polygamous nodes.

2.1.5 CULTURALLY ACCEPTED REASONS FOR POLYGAMY

There were a number of reasons cited by male participants for marrying a second or subsequent wife. The main reasons given were:

- To provide extra labour for the node
- A response to a situation in which a wife has not given birth to any children
- To have many children
- A response to a situation in which an existing wife/wives is/are deemed not to be obeying their husband

The reasons cited by women to explain why men acquire a second or subsequent wife were very similar to those provided by men, although the last reason was only referred to in FGDs and not in interviews. Women tended to focus on the fact that polygamy was an accepted tradition and therefore an accepted way of life.

Well … he (her husband) said that his late father married two to three wives so he too will follow in the footsteps of his father by marrying more wives. (Fatmata Turay, first wife, in Kaserie Mathathoi)

Interestingly, despite the range of reasons provided, in the in-depth interviews women reported that when their husbands proposed marrying a new wife, they justified this to their wives by arguing that it was to provide extra labour for the household.

My husband informed me that since I am not used to the farm work, he will like to bring in a second wife who would assist us during farming activities. (Fatu Sankoh, first wife, in Mashere Thenkle)

To provide extra labour for the node was the most common reason given for acquiring another wife. Most commonly, respondents noted that polygamy was directly related to the main economic activity in the communities (farming), and that additional labour is needed to physically tend the land.

To have two or more wives is good. For example, we, the farmers, we need two or more wives because one wife cannot carry out all the farming process but if we have two or more it will help. (Male participant in FGD at Kaserie Mathathoi)

9. For example, see Millar, 2015.
It was also reported that chiefs might acquire additional wives to support the node in hosting guests.

Two of the reasons cited by men for having more than one wife are interlinked as they relate to children and childbearing, which are seen as an essential part of a marriage contract. By having multiple wives, a man is more easily able to have more children, which is seen as a sign of his masculinity and power. Additionally if a wife has not given birth then a husband will be likely to acquire another wife. This is not limited to the first wife; if any wife has not had children this could be a reason to acquire another wife.

It was also mentioned that if a wife is not obedient or is considered ‘lazy’ then a husband may bring another wife into the node.

**Men don’t like stress; if the one wife is giving him problems all the time, one day he will decide to marry another wife to overcome the stress.** (Male participant in an FGD at Robump)

Within the research communities, despite the high level of polygamy, many negative consequences associated with it were reported. These included much higher levels of conflict and the phrase ‘one women is a headache, two women are two headaches’ was used frequently in the communities, implying that additional wives results in additional burden/stress for a man. Despite this, there was a general acceptance from both men and women that most marriages are polygamous and that conflict is a natural consequence of that.

### 2.1.6 ACCEPTING A CO-WIFE

It is expected, in customary practice, for a husband to inform his existing wife/wives when he intends to bring another wife into the node, and in theory he should obtain their permission for this new marriage (Dorjahn, 1988, 373). All but one of the wives interviewed reported that their husbands had sought their permission before bringing in a new wife; they had all initially resisted the idea but in the end they had come to accept it. The process over which wives’ agreement is sought normally results in a man buying his existing wife/wives a gift to appease them and gain their ‘consent’ to the new marriage. Yeama’s experience shows that even when a wife is consulted, she has very little chance of preventing the new marriage from happening.

He told his brother to inform me that he has got a wife to marry within the village; I said to him ‘hmm it is not with my consent’. I said to his brother that I didn’t want a co-wife and even when he [her husband] asked for my hand in marriage I told him the same thing. My husband said whether I like it or not he will marry the second wife. I had to transfer to my people in the other village and explain the matter to them. My parents advised me to return back to my marital home for the sake of my children. His brother later came for me and I was left with no option but to return and look after my children so this is the reason I am still in this marriage, to look after my children. (In-depth interview with Yeama Bangura, first wife, Kaserie Mathathoi)

Although their permission is sought, women typically lack bargaining power to stop additional marriages. The women are however able to take action once the marriage has been contracted, such as leaving the marital home or trying to remove the new wife. However, there were no examples in this study of a husband who had reconsidered marrying another wife because of the wishes of his existing wife or wives.

A wife’s resistance and reluctant acceptance of polygamous marriages must be understood within the wider context of the conjugal contract and specifically a wife’s subservient position of dependence. A woman is considered to need a man to provide for her. Therefore, when deciding whether to accept a co-wife the woman must weigh up whether she has sufficient family support and resources to be able to survive if she leaves the marriage. This does not mean that divorce does not occur, however, and a number of the women had previously been married and left their husbands and subsequently sought a new husband to materially provide for them.

### 2.2 Access to collective resources within the node

Within polygamous unions there is a social expectation that the husband is able to adequately and equitably provide for all of his wives (Dorjahn, 1988, 375). It is this expectation of the equitable distribution of resources which epitomises the distinctiveness of polygamous nodes. The main finding that emerges from the data is the lack of adherence to this expectation and the affect this has on dynamics within the polygamous nodes.
The following section details the role that resources and access to these resources plays on the relationships within the node.

2.2.1 PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES IN NODES

All of those interviewed in the study are involved in farming. In many of the families in the three rural locations, the main economic source is farming and the resources gained from this come from the harvest, which is the primary source of the node’s economic survival. In Foredugu, a peri-urban area, there were a number of nodes engaged in business who no longer gained their main source of income from farming. These families had both produce and income to distribute within the household.

The most common crop farmed was rice but some nodes reported also using land to grow a variety of other crops including groundnuts, peppers, and cassava. The farming area of the nodes varied considerably (from production of 5 bushels of rice to 50 bushels). There is insufficient data to draw conclusions about the effect of either stability of tenure or size of land on the distribution of resources or relations within the node, although these are clearly important factors that may influence women and men’s well-being.

The members of the node typically collectively farm a piece of land, which is either rented or owned by the husband or his family. Rented land is often paid for by giving a percentage of the harvest proceeds to the owner of the land. The only wives who were not involved in this collective work were those suffering illness or those assigned by their husbands to run small businesses. It was reported by men and women that labour on the collective farm takes priority over any other economic activities which women may be engaged in.

As the head of the node, husbands are reported to make all decisions relating to land being collectively farmed by the node; from which crops to plant, to the distribution of labour on a daily basis, to decisions regarding sales and marketing of harvests.

Husbands may discuss these decisions with other members of the node and may be influenced by their opinions, but they are ultimately the decision-makers. It was reported that a husband will instruct his wives to go to the field and to complete certain tasks on a daily basis. These gender roles were generally understood and respected by most of the women.

Hassanatu: When morning comes, he says we should go to the farm, I agree and we go.
Interviewer: Who decides on what to grow?
Hassanatu: Our husband.
Interviewer: Is there a time you’ve influenced him not to grow a particular crop in the farm?
Hassanatu: No it has never happened.
(In-depth interview with Hassanatu Kargbo, second wife in Robump)

The activities on the farm are divided by sex; women are typically given the task of weeding whereas clearing the land and harvesting are seen as activities for men.

The main work they have is weeding. After that if it is harvest time and we have workers [and] they will harvest some rice that will be used as food for the workers. They are responsible for milling the rice and cooking the food after I have bought the cooking utensils. (In-depth interview with Issa Sesay, husband, Foredugu).

This control over the land farmed by the node extends to the distribution and sale of the harvest. In all but one of the nodes, the husband was reported to have the final say on which proportion to sell and which to keep and how to distribute this resource within the home. The wives often try to influence the husband’s decision but he makes the final choice.
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 Kamara, first wife, in Kaserie Mathathoi)

Any income from the sale of the harvest will be kept by the husband, who may then distribute some or all of it to his wives. However, it was reported that if the husband sells the harvest he will not disclose to his wives the amount of income he obtained from this sale.

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. (Aminata Fofana, third wife, Foredugu, 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 resource distribution, each type equally common:

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

Once the distribution has occurred the wives then negotiate ongoing access to any collective resources which are not directly theirs to control. In the first type of distribution this occurs on a daily basis, in the second it is required when there are larger household expenses to be paid, and in the third it is necessary if one individual’s shares have been depleted.

Normally we, the co-wives, will inform the husband that, now that we have harvested - what do we do? As we have to pay for medical for our children and other things? So if these issues arise the husband will say hmmm... Presently there is nothing, do you still have the farm proceeds? We will say yes. The husband will then say, ok take some proceeds and sell to take the child to the hospital and to pay the school fees. (In-depth interview with Fatu Sankoh, first wife, Masherie Thenkle)

In some households a portion of the harvest is used collectively, by the wives, for the household’s dietary needs. Around half of the nodes cooked from one pot,10 and therefore collectively engaged in using, at least some of, the household resources. However, beyond the consumption of food there is minimal communal use of collective resources.11 For example, each wife will have to negotiate the amount that will be allocated to her children’s education. The wives reported using the money or produce that was given to them, or that they earned individually, solely for the well-being of themselves and their children, rather than for the whole node. There was only one example of a node where the co-wives collectively ran a business and used the profits to pay for both of their children’s education. Furthermore, when the collective food resources are scarce, food that is acquired by each wife will not be used to feed her co-wives or their children.

10. The term refers to people eating from the same meal, which is often cooked in one cooking pot. The term is widely used in Sierra Leone and the 2016 census used the term to define the number of persons in a household.

11. This observation, signifying the ‘non-corporateness’ of these households (i.e. almost separate economies but conjugal contract underpinning) cannot be said to be particular to polygamous foyers. Similar systems have been well documented throughout Sub-Saharan Africa (See (Raza 2013) and Kabeer, 1994).
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 Bangura, first wife, in Kaserie Mathathoi)

This finding provides an insight into the social relations of the node and the separateness of wives within polygamous unions, even when they reside under one roof. Additionally it means that individual access to collective resources becomes even more important, as wives are reliant on their share to provide for their children; if they have a smaller share then the well-being of their family unit is at risk. This finding is especially important in contexts of resource scarcity. It was widely reported in FGDs and in-depth interviews with women that the husband was often unable to provide for all the economic needs for the node. All of the women interviewed reported having to supplement what they were given by their husbands to be able to sustain themselves and their children. The majority of the women interviewed were engaged in selling agricultural products such as peppers, palm oil or ground nuts.

Zainab: If you talk to him and he says he doesn’t have, he will tell you to add where he stops.
Interviewer: Where will you get the money?
Zainab: From my business or from the palm nut I processed and sell, that money I will use.
(In-depth interview with Zainab Kamara, first wife, Robump)

In theory when a man does not provide for his wife then she has the right to not obey him.

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. (Male participant, in an FGD in Masherie Thenkle)

As long has we’ve conceived for him and we’ve being together for so long we cannot scold him if he does not give us money for food. You the woman needs to stand firm for your child so that when something goes wrong, you the wife will support the husband in order for the children to not be hungry. Under the business you are doing you have to take from it to support the farming activities and the children’s education. (In-depth interview with Aminata Conteh, first wife, in Masherie Thenkle)

Furthermore in the final FGDs, despite the theoretical social norm freeing wife from her obligation when not provided for by her husband, it was reported that in practice 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.

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 with second wife, Masherie Thenkle)

As the above quote demonstrates, a wife’s responsibility to obey is not solely tied to obligations under the conjugal contract but is heavily influenced by religious and cultural norms, which are deeply embedded socially and internalised individually. This means that a woman is likely to support her husband and continue to prioritise the collective farm labour over her own economic endeavours, even if he is unable to provide for her. Additionally, the insufficiency of resource provision by husbands means that access to, and influence over, collective resources becomes an important dynamic within a polygamous node.

However, most of the women interviewed were accepting of this situation as they felt that it was their responsibility to their children to be able to add to the money provided by the husband.
2.2.2 NEGOTIATING ALLOCATION: RANK VS. INFLUENCE

As described, there is an expectation of equal distribution of resources between the wives, and non-adherence to this principal encourages competition between wives for access to resources. There is one constant within the node hierarchy; the husband is always the head. However, the other positions vary according to a constant shuffle between rank and influence. Although rank is fixed, unless a woman leaves the node, it does not always grant greater access to resources, and a wife’s influence can be determined by a variety of factors.

**Rank** is determined by the order of marriage and not the age of the wives, even though the first wife is commonly referred to as the ‘senior’ or ‘big’ wife.

> I look at her age and we are similar, we grew up in the same community it is only that she got married before me in the community. (In-depth interview with Isatu Conteh, second wife, Masherie Thenkle)

There is power attached to the position of senior wife, most often related to domestic decisions within the home and specifically the allocation of domestic duties and resources which are needed to carry these out. This is generally an area where husbands are not involved. As already noted, the first wife may be in charge of the daily allocation of food resources. Her position may also entitle her to greater influence over decisions regarding the allocation of collective resources, as the following account shows.

> Yomba: when we harvest groundnut, we store it and sell it later.
> Interviewer: Who says you should sell?
> Yomba: I tell my husband that we should sell and that the price is up.
> Interviewer: Who suggests that they should sell?
> Yomba: Me and my husband.
> Interviewer: How can your other co-wives convince you or your husband to sell the farm produce or not to sell?
> Yomba: No, they can’t convince us.

(In-depth interview with Yomba Sesay, first wife, Foredugu)

There is also an externally recognised status to being a senior wife. In the final FGDs all the groups reported that if an NGO had given financial support to the second wife and not the first then she would have been unhappy because she, as the senior wife, should have received such an opportunity.

> Well if it happens you as the first wife will not be happy you will say this is the second wife why should she benefit from this when I am the first one, you will not be at peace and will even leave the house and go to your parents...As the junior wife you will also not be happy because even if you have the money there will always be conflict. (Female participant in FGD with 1st wives in Foredugu)

It is mainly tradition which dictates that the first wife is the senior wife, although a number of reasons for this tradition were given by the husbands. A number of men and women said that the first wife was at the top of the co-wife hierarchy because they shared the longest economic and familial struggle with the husband.

> When you go out to look for greener pasture, you marry a woman, she struggles with you, she is trusted and sincere, no matter if others come after her, the one I was struggling with and I know better is whom I will trust most.

(In-depth interview with Issa Sesay, husband, in Foredugu)

This quote reveals the role that respect and a sense of belonging plays within the distribution of power within the node. The relationships of the node are not purely transactional, despite the ideas of ownership which are attached to the conjugal contract. Husbands and wives talked at length of the role that affection and mutual support played in the formation and the enduring bond of marriage.

The data shows that there is a complex relationship between power and status within the polygamous nodes. Despite the first wife’s status, she may not have access to a greater share of resources. Ultimately it is the husband who decides on the distribution of collective resources and his decision is affected by the influence that each wife has, which shifts over time. It was reported by both men and women that the ‘favourite’ wife, who may or may not be the first wife, had the greatest influence. It was widely believed by women that the favourite wife secretly acquires extra resources from the husband.

> If she sees her co-wife getting closer to the husband; she became jealous thinking that the husband has given money to the co-wife and then there will be no peace at home, especially when the husband is poor. (Male participant, FGD in Robump)

12. Rank refers to the chronological order in which co-wives married their husband, and influence refers to the more fluid concept of social standing within the household (Ellis, 2014).
As noted, cultural and religious convention dictates that polygamy is premised on the principle that all wives should be treated equally. Therefore it is unsurprising that given the lack of transparency over income from harvest profits there is mistrust between co-wives regarding the unequal distribution of resources due to favouritism. None of the wives interviewed self-identified as being the ‘favourite’ and none of the husbands stated who their ‘favourite’ wife was.

Whilst the rank of senior and junior wife/wives is fixed, the role of favourite is constantly open to shifts based on the husband’s current feelings, and their interaction with wider socio-economic dynamics such as: rank, level of family support; access to independent sources of income; age; number or gender of children; and obedience to the husband (as discussed below). The power that is attached to the role of favourite is then often vied for between the co-wives, creating mistrust and tension between them.

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, FGD with first wives, Kaserie Mathathoi)

Despite the fact that influence is not determined by rank it was commonly reported that junior wives were often favoured for their youth.

I will love the last wife more and give her my attention because she is new. The other wives will be very angry, because they will see that she is young, fresh and beautiful and she is the one taking my attention. (Interview with local Chief, Foredugu)

When the second wife came in the house, it is me, the first wife that has been left behind; he now focuses to the second wife even when it’s my days to sleep with the husband; when my husband enters the room he will not have any sexual intercourse with me. (In-depth interview with Yeama Bangura, first wife, Kaserie Mathathoi)

The influence which the favourite wife was reported to have did not just translate into greater access to resources but more negotiating power over the terms of the conjugal contract. For example, generally it was reported that women’s time labouring on the collective farm was considered to take priority over any time spent on individual productive activities, such as running small businesses. If a wife prioritised her own economic activities she would risk reducing her share of communal resources. However, it was frequently noted that the ‘favourite’ wife was able to negotiate her labour time for communal activities, without impinging on her access to collective resources, thus altering the terms by which goods and services are exchanged within the conjugal contract.

We as women are not happy with the way the husband shares the work, because when it is time to work, the favourite wife will not go to the farm and in some instances, she will even travel to her parents. When it is time for harvest, you will see the favourite wife coming to be part of the sharing and the man will give more to her than the ones that actually suffered doing the work. When we see that happening, we will definitely not be happy. (Female participant, FGD in Kaserie Mathathoi)

Not being the favourite could also have consequences beyond low levels of influence. One wife reported that as the disfavoured wife she was more likely to face gender based violence (GBV).

For my own side my husband did not favour me, he inflicted punishment; on my side I faced violence most times. (Female participant, FGD in Masherie Thenkle)

Others reported feeling discarded and mentally anguished as a result of their husband’s favouritism of another wife.

THE ROLE OF OBEDIENCE IN FAVOURITISM

The main reason given by men for favouring one wife over was her level of obedience.

Well, I do not love them equally, because it mostly depends on the attitude of the women. If one of them disrespects me and the other is obedient, definitely I will like the one who listens to me more. (Interview with local Chief, Foredugu)
Obedience is considered to be one of the most fundamental qualities of a wife, meaning that all negotiation for resources must be achieved without it being perceived as insubordination. Within a polygamous node a woman is not only negotiating from a subservient position but competing to be the most compliant, whilst simultaneously trying to maximise her access to collective resources. This inherent competition for influence also possibly explains why men’s lack of provision is accepted by the majority of the women interviewed. A woman who reprimands her husband for not providing for her may be considered as disobedient and therefore risk losing access to communal resources.

A man will love a woman due to how much love the woman shows him. When he marries you, you are expected to listen and obey him, so if he calls you to go on errand and you run and tremble to do his wish, then he will love you more. If you go around disgracing him in public, he will hate you forever. (Female participant, FGD with 2nd wives Kaserie Mathathoi)

It was reported to be socially acceptable for wives to renegotiate the norms of obedience when their husbands have failed in their responsibility to provide; however to do so within a polygamous household risks reducing bargaining power and access to resources. The actions of one wife are judged against those of other co-wives, who if seen as more obedient may be elevated in their husband’s favour.

At the root of this power struggle between wives is the distribution of collective resources. As very little is communally purchased there will always be inherent scope for tension within the distribution of collective resources. Additionally, the wives collectively till the land but may not equally benefit from this labour, as they do not have power over resource allocation. This arrangement provokes a hostile and not harmonious relationship between wives of competition for the husband’s favour which impacts on the bond between co-wives.

2.3 Co-wife relations

The data shows an ongoing flux between the co-wives’ relations, ranging from periods of open animosity to cordial relations. As the majority of nodes co-habit, the levels of interaction between wives are relatively high. This frequent interaction provides ample opportunity for quarrels to occur, and is compounded by the competitive nature of access to collective resources. In interviews with extended family members, a pervasive atmosphere of tension was described, which sometimes erupted into conflict.

It is chaotic. There are issues coming up between them day in and day out. (Male participants, FGD in Kaserie Mathathoi)

This does not mean that all relations were acrimonious, but in the majority of nodes there were reported to be more periods of acrimony than cordiality.

2.3.1 CORDIAL RELATIONS

When there is no conflict or very minor conflicts there are generally high levels of co-operation between wives and relatively cordial relations. Domestic tasks within the home are shared between the co-wives; in general it is the first wife who delegates these activities to the junior wives. Sometimes wives are allocated a particular task such as cooking or going to market, while in other nodes the tasks alternate between wives, depending on their circumstances at the time. Within this division there are high levels of co-operation, with the wives collectively engaging in the maintenance of the household. Only one node demonstrated persistent cordial relations and they showed very high levels of co-operation.
We are always at peace and when it time to go to the farm, she only needs to call me once and I will be out running to the farm. I respect her because she is like my mother and she treats me like her child and so I will never think of doing something to her that she will not like. She is doing soap business and most times she gives me money for my children. She uses her money to send her children to school and to take care of the family when our husband cannot provide. (In-depth interview with Emma Kanu, second wife, in Mashere Thenkle)

For some co-wives the time spent collectively working together can also lead to an affinity for each other, and a level of respect for the support that each provides the other. However, the inherent insecurity of position within polygamous nodes and co-wife’s anxieties over their influence within the node is constantly under the surface of cordial relations.

2.3.2 COMMON CAUSES OF CONFLICT BETWEEN CO-WIVES

There are a number of common circumstances which can inflame anxieties and cause simmering tension to erupt into conflict between co-wives. These conflicts are normally resolved through informal mediation by extended family members. The majority of the circumstances which can trigger conflict are closely related to the ongoing struggle for influence within the node, and are linked to:

A. Husband’s unequal treatment of wives (regarding resources)

A husband’s unequal treatment of wife vis-à-vis the sharing of resources is a contradiction of customary and religious norms and has direct negative consequences for the well-being of the co-wives. It can lead to conflict between a husband and wife, and more commonly to conflict between co-wives.

Disputes normally happen when the husband gives something to one wife without giving to 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. (Interview with Fatmata Kamara, Kaserie Mathathoi, sister-in-law of Zainab Bangura)

In FGDs, it was reported that most of these quarrels resulted from suspected unequal treatment rather than a husband openly giving wives different amounts.

B. The introduction of a new wife

When you are so close or just smile with the other wife, the co-wife will say you are doing better things for the other one and jealousy and hardheartedness starts. (Male participants, FGD in Mashere Thenkle).

These conflicts can be short lived or they can generate long standing animosity between wives. One example of this is the case of Yeama Bangura who feels that since her husband married a second wife she has been discarded, which causes animosity between the two wives. Below is the description of how Yeama finds having a co-wife:

C. Conflict between the co-wives’ children

I do not feel fine; I felt pain in my heart because when the husband has something he will not give it to me but instead he gives it to my co-wife. My entire body became weak, my heart bleeds sometimes. I even cry because a day will come when there is nothing to eat, and I am not feeling good at all. (In-depth interview with Yeama Bangura, first wife, Kaserie Mathathoi)

D. A husband not splitting his time evenly between wives
The introduction of a new wife

The introduction of a new wife is a particular time of flux within the node when the current hierarchy is threatened. If the wife/wives were opposed to the introduction of a new wife into the node then the initial period of having the wife in the home can be characterised by conflict. The following example demonstrates a common reaction to the arrival of a new wife.

When co-wives are not on good terms with each other, the moment they hear or come to know another one is coming they will immediately change their attitude, of not being together, and join forces against the third wife. They will gang up against her in order to move her out of the house. It’s really happening, so that the third wife will hopefully become discouraged and leave. Also if both first and second wives have children, even if they were not at peace before for the sake of their children they will come together and mount pressure against the third wife. When I married, it took time before I started to conceive; my mate mounted pressure so that I would leave, but my husband encouraged me not to. By the time I was settled and getting used to the stress, my husband married another wife, I and my first mate automatically became friends. (Female participant, FGD with second wives in Masherien Thenkle).

It was also reported that this attempt to force a wife to leave the node was also carried out by the new wives who try and influence their husbands to abandon their senior mates.

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. (Interview with Fatmata Kamara, Kaserie Mathathoi, sister-in-law of Zainab Bangura)

These scenarios describe (and result in) open aggression aimed at either reinforcing the status quo of power relations or usurping the existing wives’ influence within the node. Generally over time the conflict settles as the roles and responsibilities are re-negotiated to include the new wife. However, any perception of favouritism by the husband to the new wife is likely to prolong the situation.

Conflict over the co-wives’ children

Another common issue reported by respondents as a cause of conflict was problems between children of the co-wives. These fights often drew in the wives and led to wider conflict between the co-wives.

They quarrel because of their children, one has little children while the other has mature ones. The mature one hit the small one and there is a quarrel between the two mothers and they fight. (Interview with Kadi Sesay, younger brother of Khalilu Koruma, Robump)

Furthermore, when there is a high level of animosity between wives this can often lead to long term problems between the co-wives children, even when they are adults.

A husband not splitting his time evenly between wives

Another issue which might spark conflict is the way in which a husband splits his time between wives. It is conventional for a husband to share 3 days with each wife and then rotate. When this rule is not respected, this can cause conflict between the wives and lead to accusations of favouritism.

Sometimes if you share a bed that night with your husband and your mate does not she will become angry, seeing this differences; the husband will call you aside and admonish you to calm down and take courage, then both of us will be at peace again. (In-depth interview with Brima Kamara, second wife, Masherien Thenkle)

In some cases where there were bad relations between the wives any time that was spent alone with the husband could lead to conflict. For example in the case of Yeama the accusations of favouritism were so pertinent that she believed her co-wife was sabotaging her time with her husband.
If it happens to be my allocated day (with my husband) this will be the time she will talk all kinds of rubbish against me (to the husband). (In-depth interview with Yeama Bagura, first wife, Masherie Thenkle)

2.3.3 THE IMPACT OF CONFLICT BETWEEN CO-WIVES ON THE DISTRIBUTION OF LABOUR WITHIN THE NODE

When there are cordial relations between co-wives there is a high level of co-operation between co-wives regarding domestic duties. Although the activities within the node do not appear to differ substantially to those within monogamous homes, the added dimension of the relations between the co-wives complicates the routinized pattern of carrying out tasks. Wives may actively rebel against the allocation of tasks as a way to assert their power over other wives, or the conflict between them may cause sufficient acrimony that co-operation becomes untenable.

The distribution of domestic tasks is a forum in which junior wives can attempt to assert their power. There were numerous accounts by first wives of their junior wives not listening to their instructions, or respecting their position as first wife.

Some women are very arrogant and will not respect the older wives because she will say they all have the same right. If such occurs then there will not be peace in that house anymore. (Female participant at a FGD in Kaserie Mathathoi)

A junior wife may disobey because she feels the first wife is abusing her power by unfairly allocating the responsibilities within the home.

My co-wife is here. Whatever she instructed me I will obey her, but she will over work me and that is where the conflict started...and I will not spare her any words because both of us owe our obligations to the husband, we are all slaves. (Female participant at a FGD in Masherie Thenkle)

Even if a wife is not actively rebelling against the hierarchy, in times of conflict she can withdraw the normal privileges associated with co-operation, such as child care.

If we are not at peace I will not take care of them (the children), if we are at peace I will do so. (Female participant at a FGD with first wives in Kaserie Mathathoi).

Co-operation is a form of power, and refusal to engage in the normal running of the household is a way that the wives can exercise power over each other.

One of the most important signifiers of times of conflict and times of peace described by respondents is whether the wives shared from the same cooking pot. When conflict occurs, wives reported refusing to eat the food the other has cooked and instead cooking in a separate pot.13

“Well, if we are not having any misunderstanding we share the same pot but when there is no peace at all everybody will be preparing her own food separately and it can even take a month without sharing the same pot and in this situation everybody will strike for herself to find food for her family and will dish-up for husband and her own children” (In-depth interview with Fatmata Turay, first wife, Kaserie Mathathoi)

There is a level of tension in polygamous homes which is driven by the inherent competition for influence with the husband and access to collective resources. This competition for status and insecurity over well-being is always lingering under the surface and is commonly triggered, turning cordial relations into acrimonious ones.

2.4 Well-being

Building on the findings described previously concerning the dimensions of conjugal contract, distribution of resources and co-wife relations, this section introduces Kabeer’s concept of social well-being. Kabeer conceptualises well-being as survival, security and autonomy, where autonomy means the ability to participate fully in those decisions that shape one’s choices and one’s life changes, at both the personal and collective level.

As the previous sections have shown there is a high level of insecurity within women’s experiences of polygamy. Women are reliant on men for access to assets and resources from the collective farmland. Some women are in a better position to influence their husband’s distribution of these resources than others, but all wives have to rely on access to individually acquired resources to ensure their well-being and that of their children.

13. It is possible that the specific refusal to eat the food another cooks is related to fears of witchcraft. This was not explicitly mentioned by interviewees but was a conclusion that partner staff drew from the conversations with women.
Three types of individual resources emerged throughout the study which women also rely on for survival, security and autonomy:

1. Access to individual income
2. Group membership
3. Support from their parents

2.4.1 INDIVIDUAL RESOURCES

The resources that women access through their husbands are reportedly insufficient for their well-being. Access to independent economic resources emerged as one vital source for securing a woman’s well-being. The main source of income is through selling small quantities of agricultural products. It appears that women obtain these products either through vegetable plots that they individually cultivate, or through membership of savings and loans groups. These small associations are very important to the women as they provided them with a safety net both for adding substance to the family meals and payment of school fees.

The money generated from these associations is not, in general, used for ‘household expenses’ but rather for the women’s own mother-child unit. Although these individual resources are necessary for survival, women’s control over the income they generate is mediated by the complexities of the power relations within the node. A general rule of thumb is that what is earned individually is one’s to use exclusively, or as one woman put it:

“I can reserve it for my purpose.” (In-depth interview with Zainab Kamara, first wife, Robump)

However, women are expected to inform their husbands about any monetary income and to give their husbands a loan if/when requested. Women can refuse to use this money to supplement the resources provided by the husband, as shown below, as this is their individual income.

Well I am in control of the money, but most times if it happens that there is nothing in the home I will ask my husband what to do. He will tell me to borrow from the business but most times I refuse and I will take this money to chairlady (of the Osusu group) for safe keeping and by the end of the week I will ask her and she will remove the money and hand it over to me. After this I will go to the market to add to the business. I used part of this money to assist in my children’s education and also manage it for the balance that will remain so I can continue with the business. (In-depth interview with Zainab Kamara, first wife, Robump)

However, as discussed in section 2.2, most wives reported using their money to supplement the mother-child unit’s household consumption budget when their husbands were unable or unwilling to sufficiently provide for the families’ food consumption. The women’s individual economic activities do support the wives’ well-being, but as the profits are increasingly absorbed into the mother-child unit’s household consumption, the women are unable to use the income from these enterprises to gain assets. Although individual economic activities may lead to individual empowerment for women, their inability to accumulate their assets means that their dependence on their husband’s contributions is not altered. In addition, this individual economic activity can create an additional burden for women on top of existing domestic and farm labour work.

There is also an important distinction regarding a woman’s control over income, between money which a husband has given to his wife to start a business and money which she acquired from another source, such as her family members or a NGO. If a husband has given his wife the money then he ultimately has control over when to reclaim his capital and has much greater control over the use of the profits, whereas if the money is provided by family or an NGO then the husband cannot typically demand access to the capital or profits. However, in these cases husbands can and frequently do request loans. These loans are rarely paid back to the wives although there was a clear expectation that they should be given when asked for.

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 but 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 with first wives in Foredugu)

It would be misleading to suggest that this demonstrates a husband’s total control over a wife’s independent income; the situation is more complex.
Wives may not want to refuse their partners because of their shared history and collective experience, or they may think that refusing to give him a loan may have consequences for their access to collective resources. Given that obedience is a wife’s duty it is unlikely that any woman would be able to continually deny granting a loan to her husband and expect to maintain her level of influence in the node.

It is important to note that there was no incident mentioned of a co-wife lending money to another co-wife although it was noted that the husband acts as a conduit to enable this to in effect happen.

My husband will take my money or ask me to buy business and he will take it to my co-wife, after selling he leaves the profit with her and buys you another business and gives it back to you so that he has a way to satisfy the other. (Female participant at a FGD with second wives in Foredugu)

There is also a delicate balance between having enough money to serve as a safety net to ensure that a woman and her children are provided for, and having so much income that you are then excluded in the distribution of collective 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 at a FGD with first wives in Kaserie Mathathoi)

Although wives are meant to tell their husbands how much they have earned (according to social norms), some women may not for fear of receiving fewer household resources. A number of husbands specifically mentioned their concerns over the trustworthiness of some or all of their wives regarding money.

If she sells, especially in my absence, there is the possibility for her to hold onto the money, while it is for all of us that we are working. (In-depth interview with Solomon Kamara, husband, Robump)

The women must also balance their domestic duties and labour on the collective farmland with time spent generating their own income, and any individual resource generation must come second and not interfere with their duties as a wife.

Some woman when they have business, they don’t care about their husbands; all what they care about is their business. (Female participant at a FGD with first wives in Kaserie Mathathoi)

Furthermore, women risk being accused of being ‘prostitutes’ (a term denoting immorality and intent to form extramarital affairs) when they are out of the house engaging in business. It was repeatedly mentioned by research participants that women who travel to conduct business are often assumed to be engaging in extra marital affairs, and referred to as prostitutes. Women must therefore tread a fine line: navigating their efforts to obtain extra income without flouting gender norms. This means that although the economic empowerment and income generation of women is important for well-being, it cannot be effective in isolation from the wider social dimensions of the node.

2.4.2 GROUP MEMBERSHIP

Group membership was not a specific focus of interviews but emerged within women’s accounts of their lives. 11 out of the 16 women interviewed were part of community based organisations (CBO). The CBOs were either agricultural groups providing collective labour or savings groups (one common form of these is called Osusu). Membership provided another individual resource for the women’s well-being. Most of the women use the money they earn through their membership in these groups to pay for larger expenses such as marriage ceremonies for their children, Bondo society, children’s school fees and funerals.

This Osusu has helped me greatly. When I receive my Osusu money, my husband will also know and he will tell me to keep it; he will know that I am a straight forward woman, and when my neighbour comes for assistance, I will also loan them if they can pay. When my children have school fee problems I will take the loan and pay the fees, and when their father gets money he pays back, so this is the way this Osusu has helped me. (In-depth interview with Fatmata Turay, first wife, Kaserie Mathathoi)

14. The Bondo (also referred to as Sande) society is a secret society that initiates young girls into women adulthood. It comprises harmful traditional practices, including female genital mutilation.
2.4.3 SUPPORT FROM PARENTS

Another form of support which women can draw on in times of conflict or insecurity comes from their biological families. It was reported that women would often return to their parent’s home when there was a serious problem with their husband or co-wife. Throughout the study, instances in which women leaving the marital home and returning to her parents were described. This was typically a temporary measure until the problem in question is resolved. The wives’ parents/extended family play an important role in mediating between the husband and wife during such periods as the following example shows:

“Most times when we have misunderstanding I will move to my parents at the village and they will call on the husband and settle this between us. If the co-wife offended me I will report her to the community people but if it the husband that offends me, I will go to my parents and they will settle the matter without siding with anybody. If I happen to be at fault my parent will tell me the truth, but if it is my husband that is at fault they will also tell him peacefully and fine him for his action towards me. My parents will warn him not to maltreat me as I am his first wife.” (In-depth interview with Yeama Bangura, first wife, Kaserie Mathathoi).

By removing themselves from the marital home and returning to their maternal home, women use the available support networks they have access to and involve external mediators into the conflict. This act is a demonstration of their autonomy within the marriage, and is another way for them to negotiate their status within the marriage. Not all women had access to this resource, and some noted that the absence of this support affected their behaviour towards their husbands making them more obedient and less likely to complain.

“I don’t do something that will hurt him. I put up with everything because I don’t have a mother or father. I am entirely reliant on him, even if he does something that pains me I will just calm down, I don’t get angry at him. This is also what I tell my fellow wives, that if you no longer have parents, accept your husband and keep calm.” (Interview with Fatmata Kamara, Kaserie Mathathoi, sister-in-law of Zainab Bangura)

By being able to draw on additional resources, women are able to reduce the vulnerability that they face when solely dependent on a husband’s contributions. They must do this whilst navigating social norms and meeting the requirement of obedience to her husband.
The norms underpinning the conjugal contract place women in a subservient position where they must obey their husbands. This impinges their negotiation power in relation to the exchange of goods and services within the marriage, and creates a level of insecurity in access to the resources necessary for well-being. Within the polygamous node there is a degree of insecurity as a consequence of the complex and shifting power dynamics within the arrangement. This added dimension means that the roles and responsibilities within the conjugal contract are negotiated between the couple but are also relative to the wider node. Therefore power within a polygamous node is a constant source of potential conflict because a shift in one woman’s power directly affects the other co-wives. The expectation that wives obey their husbands creates a particularly disempowering situation for women in polygamous unions as their obedience is judged in relation to the other wives’ behaviour.

Despite women’s subordinate status being premised on the idea that the husband is the provider for the household and the wife is dependent on him, the data showed that the communal resources provided by the husband from agricultural produce are insufficient to meet the needs of the household. This failure to fulfil the underlying obligation within the conjugal contract is rarely admonished by the wives, who rely on their own individual resources to maintain their and their children’s well-being. The scarcity of communal resources creates further competition between wives as they negotiate their share. Both rank and status affect the influence that wives have within the node. A first wife may have greater power over the allocation of resources and domestic tasks within the home, and this status as senior wife may afford her greater influence over accessing communal resources.

However, influence is more likely to be determined by obtaining the status of ‘favourite’ wife.

Co-wives’ relations can range from cordial to acrimonious. Conflict is likely to be caused by perceived changes in the influence a wife has in the node. When relations are cordial there are high levels of co-operation between co-wives, domestic tasks are shared and there is collective engagement in securing the well-being of the home. However, the underlying levels of insecurity and tension often lead to conflict, which contribute to the breakdown in co-operation between wives.

Women supplement the resources provided by their husbands and can increase their well-being through small businesses. They have a degree of control over these resources but are often required to give their husbands loans from their individual incomes and must be careful not to prioritise their own incomes over their socially expected domestic duties. Similarly, where they attain high levels of economic success independently, they sometimes risk being excluded from the allocation of communal resources. Many women also rely on their parents for support, returning to their home in times of crisis or conflict and this forms a further form of resource which can increase their well-being. Although women’s ability to access additional resources is correlated with increased choice, it is not a guarantee of greater well-being. The overwhelming preference for a good relationship with their husbands over independent financial autonomy demonstrates the complexity of social relations. Addressing factors that affect a woman’s disempowerment requires transforming the unequal social norms which perpetuate women’s subordination in the conjugal contract.
4. Recommendations

The following section considers what these research findings mean for Trócaire’s work in Sierra Leone and more widely, given this not all the recommendations specifically relate to polygamy.

4.1 Invest in robust gender, power and vulnerability analysis

Programmes must invest in robust gender, power and vulnerability analysis to understand the ways in which gender norms are mediated in polygamous unions.

A. The term ‘household’ is regularly used in 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.’ Robust gender and vulnerability analyses will help avoid assumptions about the meaning of ‘household’ and power relations within it, and will make evident the complexity of social relations in communities.

B. A robust analysis that addressed these social-relations within target communities and ‘households’ can help to ensure that programmes respond to varying household and marital arrangements - including polygamy - and how power relations play out within them.

C. The analysis should also test the assumption that a female headed household is more vulnerable than a male headed household. In a polygamous node, a neglected wife may in fact be more vulnerable than a single woman, as she has less freedom and must still toil the collective land, but she may receive little in return for her labour.

4.2 Ensure that programming responds to power imbalance

Within a node, the findings clearly demonstrate that power is fluid and relational, and that ultimate power lies with a husband and can be exerted through norms of obedience.

A. Economic empowerment and livelihoods programmes must go beyond providing women with additional resources only since this risks de-responsibilising of husbands, while increasing a women’s burden of labour without corresponding gains. 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.

B. Programming which provides women with information on their rights must mitigate the risks associated with women’s attempts to claim those rights, including a backlash in the home or community resulting in violence or further disempowerment, in response to perceptions of disobedience.
Programmes need to consider how to work with variance in household structures within polygamous nodes.

A. The assumption that supporting one member of the ‘household’ is likely to lead to prosperity for all the ‘household’ must be reviewed and interrogated. Programmes that support women’s livelihoods should not be conceived as a means to addressing family poverty; such assumptions ignore the interdependence and complexity of social relations within the household and beyond.

B. Targeting one wife in a polygamous node may affect the complex balance (or imbalance) of power between co-wives. Strategies to mitigate unintended harm should 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 prioritizing the balance of power between men and women, and in some cases, between women.

C. As noted above, programming must mitigate risks associated with women’s attempts to claim their rights, and this entails recognizing the interdependence of co-wives. For example, a co-wife who refuses her husband sex is likely to lose influence to her co-wife/co-wives. It may be necessary to work with a strategy that ensures the messages about rights are passed to all the co-wives so they can collectively assert their power.

Programmes must take into account the potential prevalence of polygamy within monitoring and evaluation tools.

A. Demographics questions should include questions about polygamy. These could be as simple as asking a woman how many co-wives she has and asking a man how many wives he has.

B. Indicators which measure change at a household level must define what is meant by a household and ensure that it is consistently conveyed in monitoring and evaluation tools.

C. Introducing resources into a polygamous node could alter the complex power struggle for position and influence. It is therefore important to track changes in power relations between co-wives, and between men and women, as a result of programme interventions.
Bibliography


Ellis, E. Polygamy Literature Review: Power Relations and Decision Making in Polygamous Households, 2014 unpublished, for Trócaire


UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Sierra Leone profile, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2015.
The Irish Aid logo comprises three basic elements:

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.