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

Acknowledgements

Executive summary

1. Introduction
  1.1 Background to the Research
  1.2 Conceptual Framework
    1.2.1 Social relations approach
    1.2.2 Methodology
  1.3 Research sites

2. Research findings
  2.1 Framework for understanding polygamous marriage
    2.1.1 Legal context
    2.1.2 Marriage Norms
    2.1.3 Polygamous marriage
  2.2 Life in polygamy
    2.2.1 Presence and House-holding
    2.2.2 Co-wife relations
    2.2.3 Well being

3. Conclusions and Recommendations
  3.1 Conclusions
  3.2 Recommendations for DRC Integrated Programme

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*This report is dedicated to the memory of Samuel Kahigwa Mutumbi.*
This report on polygamy and women’s experiences of polygamous marriage in DRC is part of a wider project undertaken by Trócaire in 2016 to better understand the practice and experiences of polygamy in communities where Trócaire is working. The project was a response to a recognition that while polygamy was a discussion point among Trócaire’s partner organisations and community groups, in-depth knowledge of its structuring effects on intra and inter household relations and power was lacking. The potential implications of the 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 Consulting 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 research were:

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 research applied a social relations approach (Kabeer, 1994), a ‘subject sensitive’ approach to data gathering and analysis that places emphasis on people’s accounts of everyday experience and averts the tendency to examine men and women as isolable categories or to generalise about women-in-general and men-in-general (Cornwall et al, 2007). 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. The research also applied Whitehead’s concept of conjugal contract, defined as the ‘terms on which husbands and wives exchange goods, incomes and services, including labour, within the household’ (Whitehead 1981, pp. 88). This conceptualisation acknowledges that a marriage contract is more than an externally generated ‘structure of control’, that the contract’s reproduction is not automatic but the outcome of the everyday making of its meaning by women and men and by way of a multitude of daily actions, and that it can be articulated differently by different actors and change over time (Jackson, 1995).

Data was collected initially through key informant interviews and focus group discussions in the principle research site of Mambasa town (Ituri province) and surrounding areas (Butiaba, Kilimamweza, Muchanga and Manya). Subsequently, core data regarding experiences of life in polygamy was gathered through in-depth interviews with women and men in Mambasa town and surrounding area, with supplementary data collected in 3 locations (Kparganza, Lopa and Nizi) in the territory of Djugu (Ituri province).

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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 summary uses the term ‘polygamy’ to describe the marriage of a man with more than one wife, which is the form of polygamy that is prevalent in DRC.

2. Where this summary refers to “partners”, this refers to partner organisations that Trócaire works with and their staff members.
Summary of key findings

1. The conjugal contract & underlying power relations

The terms underpinning marriage shift with time and polygamy is not an exception. According to the primary data, a husband and wife can maintain a conjugal contract without necessarily living together (occasional visits and contributions from a husband - financial or otherwise - can suffice). In addition, a several year period in which a husband and wife live separately does not necessarily constitute a break in the conjugal contract as it is possible for one to negotiate a return to the other at any stage. At the same time, for a number of women interviewed, the marriage they spoke about was not their first. Several had been married once before or even twice attesting to the fact that shifts occur within contracts and marriages end.

The basis for a marriage will have implications for a woman’s experience within a plural wife marriage, including the level of security and autonomy she enjoys. If the basis for marriage is a pregnancy for example, it can be difficult for the woman in question to find her footing as second or third wife. This kind of basis can enable a weaker contract between herself and her husband and, overall, makes it easier for him to relinquish responsibility for supporting the women and children in his life.

It seems rare for a man to inform his existing wife/s before entering into a new marriage. This constitutes a clear example of the ways in which men are able to exert more power within marriage, and are subject to fewer obligations. Critically, when a husband enters into a second or subsequent marriage it has clear implications for existing wife/wives, in particular with regard to his presence and the resources available within the foyer. In some cases, wives are required to take on care of children born to other wives.

Irrespective of the form it takes, the data demonstrated a high social value placed on marriage. This is particularly the case for women who, in the context of DRC, are overwhelmingly defined (by themselves and others) as being ‘married with children’. A woman who needs to leave a marriage may be able to do so if she has the social support of her family and some financial autonomy but for a woman who has neither, stepping out of a marriage can be extremely challenging if not insupportable – both socially and practically. In short, the primacy of woman’s role as wife and mother curtails women’s capacity in these contexts and elsewhere to exercise autonomy within and outside of marriage.

2. Organisation of polygamous ‘foyers’ and co-wife relations

The majority of polygamous arrangements in localities around Mambasa town and in Djugu appear to be segmented (wives living in separate dwellings). However, in some instances husband, wives and children will live in the same dwelling, or share a compound. Thus, a woman appearing to live without a husband cannot be assumed to be single. Likewise it cannot be assumed that women in polygamous marriages are living with co-wives.

Irrespective of the arrangement, relations between co-wives exist and are significant. They can range from cordial to acrimonious, depending on a number of factors, including the extent to which the woman herself feels secure within the marriage as well as the extent to which a husband is perceived to be treating each wife equitably and actively fostering good relations between them. Lastly, the extent to which co-wives, or even husbands, identify the foyer (the assemblage of dwellings, husband, wives and children) as ‘family’ is not uniform.

3. Access to resources within polygamous ‘foyers’

Whether segmented or non-segmented, polygamy has a structuring effect on productive activity and allocations within and across households. In the main there is a felt separation between wives when it comes to house-holding, likely linked to the fact that processes of production are often separate. At the same time, productive activity and allocations within one ‘household’ will happen in the knowledge of other

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household(s) so while co-wives may not be competing directly they must continually negotiate allocations with their husband, from a subordinate position and through their relative bargaining power.

It is difficult to judge the extent to which allocations (from husband) are equitable; however, women reported that the provisioning is not sufficient. While men provide financial resources to the household(s) in different ways, it does not seem common for them to reveal their incomes to their wives. In a plural wife setting this can have the additional effect of charging tension and conflict between spouses and between co-wives and generates stress. The knowledge of other wives and their competing demands on a husband’s time and resources fuels awareness among the women of the need to secure their own sources of income. Wives are aware of how arrangements are subject to change and their consequent vulnerability vis-à-vis access to resources.

Overall, experiences of polygamy are shaped by complex interactions between social institutions, age, gender and other social and economic differences. Bases for marriage, age, socio-cultural norms (e.g. cultural norms which privilege women who have children and particularly boy children), access to control over land or assets, support from family and kin are all factors which determine the level of security and autonomy that a woman will enjoy within a polygamous marriage.

Summary of recommendations for DRC Integrated Programme

The report presents tentative recommendations, requiring further considerations and reflection, to strengthen programming approaches and strategies.

1. Invest in robust gender, power and vulnerability analysis

The ways in which wives in polygamous marriages navigate and experience patriarchy must be carefully analysed and understood to identify potential vulnerability. A strong gender and power analysis will prevent un-interrogated assumptions and exemplify the complex ways in which vulnerability is generated within polygamous marriage, how this vulnerability is linked to social relations within the foyer and to broader family and community processes (e.g. wider family support or not), inheritance, as well as factors that could contribute to the empowerment of women in such contexts.

As a piece of gender analysis, this report constitutes a starting point and an opportunity to showcase the value of gender analysis to support programmers to (i) avoid assumptions about men and women’s lives, and (ii) consider the ways in which women in these foyers and in the wider social context, acquire, use and lose power.

2. Community and household mapping as an integral part of programming work

Even where arrangements are segmented, women in plural wife settings engage in ongoing negotiation (direct or indirect) with other wives regarding access to and allocation of resources. Community and household mapping should therefore inform programming work, with the consent and awareness of programme participants. This kind of mapping will help to avoid a situation whereby programme activities unwittingly intensify competition and conflict dynamics within a foyer; it may also strengthen understanding of the factors that affect a person’s desire and ability to join programme activities.

3. Consider appropriate strategies to identify & engage with households and with ‘heads of household’

In DRC, a husband is de jure head of household (in law) while a woman can be classified as de-facto head of household if she has been widowed or is divorced. In reality, household headship is more complex than this. Programme teams should consider (i) how best to work with variance in household structure, and (ii) how to elicit pertinent information regarding actual house-holding, while respecting the privacy of individuals and families concerned.
The research findings illustrate some of the ways in which unequal power relations between husbands and wives, and women’s subordinate position within the family and community limits women’s options and opportunities. Tackling these inequalities requires engagement not only with women but with men also and with the social institutions in which the unequal relations are embedded and reproduced. It is vital that gender norms as well as the sources of men’s power (and women’s disempowerment) in these contexts are well understood and that this understanding is used as the basis to design and implement programmes.

Furthermore, while programming should continue to support the empowerment of women, equal effort should be made to ensure that men take appropriate responsibility for supporting their families and that positive, diverse masculinities are promoted in public life, in the community, and in the family.

Questions to consider include:

- In the cases of women in polygamous foyers whose husbands have withdrawn considerably or who are present on an inconsistent basis, is this woman a de facto head of household?
- Will she identify as such if asked? In her the everyday roles and responsibilities does she effectively fill the head of household function?
- What does this mean for programme engagement with her?

Gathering such information entails well-crafted and appropriately delivered household surveys, regular and well facilitated meetings and interactions with community and particularly women and using sensitive and informed qualitative research methods as part of routine planning and monitoring.

4. **Ensure that economic empowerment programmes promote equitable power & gender relations**

With segmented foyers, men’s presence is distributed across a number of households. This can provide them with scope to neglect their obligations to wives and children. It can also mean that a woman’s responsibility for provisioning is augmented since her husband is apparently providing for a number of wives, or does not support them consistently. With this in mind, economic empowerment programmes must go beyond providing women with additional resources since this risks de-responsibilising of husbands. 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.

Moreover, programmes that support women’s livelihoods should not be conceived as the means to addressing family poverty; such assumptions ignore the interdependence and complexity of social relations within the foyer and beyond.

5. **Engage men for gender transformation**

The research findings suggest a correlation between the autonomy that a woman is able to exercise within marriage and assets (for example her own business, or access to land independent of her husband). In addition the findings suggest that where a woman has support from wider family networks she will be more able to extract herself – if only temporarily - from situations of violence. While these aspects were not an explicit focus of the research, the findings suggest that further work could be done to identify the factors that protect and enable women’s autonomy (that is, her ability to shape choices and life changes, at both the personal and collective level), and to embed strategies that support these factors throughout programming.

6. **Embed strategies that support women’s power & autonomy**

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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.
1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the Research

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 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 the 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 Consulting 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). Following discussions with the Newstone team the specific aims of the field research were agreed as follows:

To describe the form that polygamy takes in the areas under study and how it is understood at local level.

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 DRC during the months of July and August 2016 and presents some key recommendations for Trócaire DRC’s ‘integrated programme’. Section 1 presents the conceptual framework and methodology; section 2 presents research findings including a framework for understanding polygamy in the localities reviewed and findings based on in-depth interviews with women living in polygamous unions; section 3 presents conclusions on findings as well as recommendations for the Trócaire DRC programme going forward.

1.2 Conceptual Framework

1.2.1 Social Relations Approach

The research applies a “social relations approach” (Kabeer, 1994), which is a way to conceptualise gender relations and how they determine men and women’s respective access to resources, responsibilities, attributes, capabilities, power and privilege within the household sphere and beyond. It provided the conceptual foundation for this research project, which focused on the practice and experiences of polygamy in localities within Mambasa and Djugu in Ituri, Eastern DRC.

The social relations approach is a ‘subject sensitive’ approach to data gathering and analysis, meaning that it places emphasis on people’s accounts of everyday experience, averting the tendency to examine men and women as isolable categories or to generalise about women-in-general and men-in-general in a given setting (Cornwall et al, 2007).

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

4. Where this report refers to “partners”, this refers to partner organisations that Trócaire works with and their staff members.

5. The conceptual framework and overarching methodology was common for DRC and Sierra Leone.
With its sensitivity to subject and the relationship between subject and social institution, the approach draws out the dynamics of difference within communities, the nature of relationships among women and among men and the intersection of gender with other sources of power such as age and wealth. With a social relations approach, power is not understood to emanate from any single aspect of the social system, but from a social system that enables men to mobilise a greater range of resources in a greater range of institutional domains including familial, economic and political (Kabeer, 1994).

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

SOCIAL RELATIONS APPROACH AND DRC
A 2014 ‘DRC Gender Country Profile’ commissioned by the Swedish Government in collaboration with the Department for International Development (DfID) among others pointed to an apparent low level of interest among donors and NGOs in how women in the DRC ‘acquire, maintain, use and lose power’ (Davis et al, 2014, pp.1). The report argued that the attendant notion of Congolese women as poor, rural, and ‘vulnerable’ has dominated discourses, planning and programmes to the extent that it has hindered understanding of the range of women’s experiences and needs. According to the report, discourses around sexual and gender based violence in DRC exemplify this. While gender based violence is broader than sexual violence, the latter has dominated statistics and responses, with terms like ‘epidemic’ and ‘phenomenon’ conveying a sense that the violence has a life of its own rather than being the outcome of a set of decisions by a person and within an environment that has either changed to allow such things to happen, or is unable to prevent it.

The 2014 report goes on to argue that, at a programming level, there is a tendency among donors and NGOs to consider women in DRC not so much as rights bearers but as objects for charity. At the same time programmes place onus on women, to the exclusion of men, to step up and challenge the gender order.

One of the report’s principle recommendations was for donors to base future programmes on solid research on how women acquire, maintain, use and lose power within different settings, rather than on assumptions or generalisations about women and their experience of power. Though modest in scale, this research report on polygamy hopes to make a contribution to Trócaire’s ongoing efforts in this regard and to deepen understanding of how women, through their relations with others, navigate poverty and insecurity in DRC, and within the confines of patriarchy.

1.2.2 METHODOLOGY
The conceptual foundation outlined above provided the basis for 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.
DATA COLLECTION

The data collection and analysis was conducted with locally-based partner organisations working with Trócaire in DRC, and by two consultants, one recruited locally and one international consultant. Data collection was divided into two distinct phases.

Phase one involved gathering perspectives on polygamy through key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) in the principle research site of Mambasa town and surrounding areas during July 2016. Over 60 people were met in this way. This interview and discussion data was then analysed collectively by the research team. The analysis provided the basis for loose criteria to assist with the identification of individuals for in-depth interviews and informed the development of an in-depth interview guide.6

Phase two involved the gathering of core data (experiences of life in polygamy) through in-depth interviews. 14 in-depth interviews were conducted in Mambasa town and surrounding areas during August 2016.7 Supplementary data was gathered in 3 locations in Djugu during the month of August. The additional data gathered in these locations (through KIIs, FGDs and 7 additional in-depth interviews) broadened partner involvement in the research and furthered perspectives on polygamy (with potential for comparison).8

The principles of confidentiality of testimony and right to withdraw at any time were intrinsic to this methodology and upheld by the research team members at all times. The following approach was taken when engaging prospective interviewees for the in-depth interviews and conducting in-depth interviews:

- Members of the research team took time to identify and engage with prospective interviewees. In the case of the Mambasa team, they spent up to one hour with each prospective interviewee and the process (from identification to confirmation of interviewees) took 3 weeks. For Djugu the turn-around time was shorter (just one week) but research team members also proceeded with care. There was one prospective interviewee that was not ultimately chosen after the research team discerned that the individual in question wasn’t comfortable enough talking about the subject.
- No prospective interviewee was a direct participant in or beneficiary of partner projects. At the same an indirect connection was important for follow up purposes, in case the interviewee needed support after the interview.
- When the project was introduced to prospective interviewees, partners emphasised that the intention of the research was to understand polygamy better, not to judge it.
- Partners adopted a strategy of distancing themselves from the inquiry, explaining that the research was not being led by them but by researchers from Ireland and South Kivu.
- Prospective interviewees were given the option to interview either at home or in a safe, secure and anonymous location.

6. For purposes of identification a loose criteria was developed at the end of phase 1 to ensure that participants in the research group represented a diversity of rural versus urban locations, were of different age groups, religious background, were of differing rank in the case of wives (first, second, third, and so on), and that the women lived in the general vicinity of one or more of their husband’s other wives (to capture the relational aspect, and any significant interdependence). See appendix for in-depth interview guide.

7. This marks a change from the original methodology which envisaged the research team engaging with up to 6 ‘nodes’ (that is to say 6 units each with a husband and respective wives). The change was articulated in the July 2016 field report after preliminary research was undertaken in Ituri. In Mambasa and Djugu the research team found that arrangements varied from wives co-habiting in the same house or compound to co-wives living in same area, to co-wives living in different cities. The time available only allowed for 18-20 in depth interviews so rather than taking for example one set of relations as representative of a particular type of arrangement, it was decided that interviews should be conducted with 18-20 individuals in a range of different arrangements. This seemed to be more in keeping with the variance in arrangement observed in phase 1, and allowed for a better spread of data and provide more scope for analysis.

8. See appendix one for more detailed breakdown of FGDs, KIIs and in depth interviews.
During interviews, the emphasis was on active listening and researchers using the interview guide as a way to draw out story as opposed to following a list of pre-determined questions.\(^9\)

Team de-briefs took place after every interview. These de-briefs attended to both content (of in-depth interviews) but also to process (how the process went and if there were any issues arising or observed).\(^{10}\)

During the course of the field work, three women approached the research team directly asked if they could be interviewed about their life in polygamy. These were women who had not been identified as prospective interviewees by the partners but who had heard of the project indirectly. All three women were accommodated and interviewed.\(^{11}\)

For the in-depth interviews, prioritization was given to women’s experiences of marriage. This was an intentional decision, to gather insights into the experiences and navigation of the subordinate subject position of ‘wife’. At the same time, a number of men were interviewed through KII’s and a number of these individuals had more than one wife and shared related experiences and perspectives. Both men and women also participated in the FGDs. Importantly, 3 in-depth interviews were carried out with men in polygamous unions. Each of the 3 in-depth perspectives was very different, revealing motivations for the marriages as well as insights into the relationship configuration. While these 3 accounts have not been discussed in a direct way in this report they have assisted with the overall context analysis and with analysis of the women’s in-depth accounts.

There are two further points to underline about the process. Firstly, the phased approach (with in-depth interviews coming in the second phase) allowed the research team to incrementally build knowledge of the research subject, its parameters and a collective sense of what aspects needed to be uncovered further. Secondly, a significant amount of preparation went in to formulating the in-depth interview guide, and developing the conditions (including the questions and the environment) that would help interviewees to feel comfortable.

Overall, partner staff contributions with regard to contextual insights and their pre-existing relations with community and participation in preliminary analysis made data gathering in such a short space of time possible. As co-researchers, the research project provided them with a two-fold benefit. Firstly, it enriched their understanding of polygamy and gender relations, potentially enhancing the relevance and sustainability of future gender programming. Secondly, the inclusive and participatory process strengthened partner skills in qualitative inquiry both in terms of data gathering and analysis.\(^{12}\)

**ANALYSIS**

A total of 21 in-depth interviews were conducted during the course of the field work. The transcripts of these in-depth interviews and the notes taken on them during de-briefs constituted the core research data for analysis.\(^{13}\)

The first step in analysis was a general read through of the transcripts by the lead researcher and an identification of very loose themes. These themes were then explored over 2 days by the lead and associate researcher. The team of two drew on social relations concepts (dimensions of relations, resources and well being) to establish connections...
between and variations in what women had shared. ‘Making sense’ of what they had shared required drawing on knowledge of the wider context, including the perspectives that had come through the general interviews and discussions at community level and through in-depth interviews with men.

Finally, the lead researcher undertook a deeper analysis of the in-depth interview data, continuing to work with identified connections and variations and with the key concepts of resources, relations and well being.

Interviews and group discussion have their limitations as methods, particularly with regard to relations at the level of ‘household’. Additionally, a limited time (of just 3 weeks) was available for the field research. In light of these limitations and in deference to the methodology’s subject sensitive character, this report has remained as close to the in-depth data as possible, avoiding the tendency that there can be to generalise or make claims.

1.3 Research sites

The research was carried out in two territories in the North Eastern DRC province of Ituri: Mambasa and Djugu. During the months of July and August, field data was gathered in Mambasa town as well as nearby surrounding rural areas including Butiaba, Kilimamweza, Muchanga and Manya. This data provided the foundation for the collection of supplementary data in the neighbouring territory of Djugu over 3 days in August.

Mambasa

The territory of Mambasa is by far the largest territory in the province of Ituri, constituting 50% of total surface area. While its population density has always been relatively low, the territory has hosted internally displaced persons since the 2000s and this has put pressure on existing land systems particularly in the East (Trócaire, 2015). In recent years, there has also been an intensification of artisanal mining in forests to the West, which has seen the displacement of traditional hunter gatherers (principally the Mbuti or Pygmy, who make up 30% of the population) and drawn in competing militia groups who routinely disrupt mining camps and destabilise local populations.

The majority of Mambasa’s population is concentrated in and around the town of Mambasa, along the major road axes of Komanda - Mambasa – Niania and Mangina - Mambasa – Mungbere. Islam is the predominant religion in and around the town, a presence which dates back to Arab trader settlement at the end of the 19th century. Christian churches, including Protestant, Catholic and evangelical, are also present and intermingle, as elsewhere, with traditional belief systems. The diverse faith base of Mambasa and the surrounds is mirrored in a diverse ethnic base, with the Babila, Lese, Mbo, Ndaka and Mbuti (all referred to as ‘autochtones’ meaning ‘indigenous’ or Originals of the area) living among the Budu, Bali, Nande, Bira, Alur, Ngiti, Batetela, Mambgetu, Yogo, Rumbi, Manvum, Lugbara. The latter groups moved into the area at different times and from other parts of the province as well as neighbouring provinces.

The main economic activity in these areas is farming, and this was borne out in the activity focus of the groups that the research team met. Mining is the other prominent economic activity. Indeed, while the mines are not close (6 hours or more to travel to camps), over half of the interviewees described their husbands as being ‘orpeilleurs’ (miners). Everyday income generating activities such as palm oil production, alcohol brewing and food preparation were also described as common place activities for women, with sale of excess farm produce as an additional source of revenue.
Djugu

Overall this territory is smaller than Mambasa but significantly more populated (population density is particularly high in the highland areas). Research was conducted in 3 sites in the Highlands and Central Highland areas. These areas are ethnically less diverse than Mambasa, with Hema (traditionally herders) and Lendu (traditionally pastoralists) constituting the primary ethnic groups. The impact of Congo’s conflicts has also been more direct and pronounced here. The intensity of conflict experienced is linked to prevailing local dynamics which date back to the 19th century when infrastructure was established by the Belgians to support colonial exploitation of gold. The subjugation and control of local populations in this case included colonial agents appointing chiefs, re-drawing boundaries, physically separating and racially constructing populations, and issuing concession or plantation rights to white settlers. In the post-colonial era, disputes over land rights, ownership, and access endure and have become incorporated into local struggles for political and economic power. In the case of Djugu, this has been among Hema and Lendu elites (Trócaire, 2015).

As mentioned, the data gathered in Djugu is supplementary to Mambasa data, given that the majority of time was spent in Mambasa. In Djugu, the team selected 3 sites that had also been the focus of Trócaire’s 2015 needs assessment. Kparganza was the first site. It is a rural savannah area located approximately 50km from Bunia with a high population density including herders and farmers, with strong dominance of the two ethnic groups: Lendu and Hema. Lopa was the second site. It is a peri-urban savannah near to mining areas approximately 31km from the city of Bunia. Nizi was the third site. It is also peri-urban savannah, near to mining areas and approximately 30km from the city of Bunia. In Nizi there is a greater ethnic mix resulting from the mining activity. Lopa has also been settled by displaced populations from other ethnic groups and parts of the region in recent years. Population density in these two localities is high, with most involved in mining, small business and a little agriculture.

While the time in Djugu was limited it was worthwhile. Firstly, it gave partner staff working in Djugu territory an opportunity to engage with and undertake the research and to build new capacities and insights. Secondly it provided a basis for potential comparison. From a research perspective, it is always helpful to engage in one area and move to another to see the ways in which practices are similar or differing.

14. Since the late 1990s, Ituri has been the scene of some of the bloodiest fighting and gravest atrocities of Congo’s numerous conflicts. This conflict is intimately linked to conflict in the provinces of North and South Kivu, and other parts of the eastern DRC, but is also rooted in aforementioned local histories of socio-economic relations and natural resource exploitation (Trócaire, June 2015). The particularly vicious nature of war in Ituri (including large-scale massacres, widespread sexual violence, and the use of child soldiers) provided the basis for the indictment of four individuals by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in the late 2000s and for war crimes and crimes against humanity. The most intense period of conflict was 1999–2007, but violence resurfaced in 2012, and insecurity continues to affect the life opportunities of Ituri’s estimated 4.2 million inhabitants.
Section 2.1 presents a framework for understanding polygamous unions in the research sites. While there is some reference to in-depth interview data, this section is based mainly on phase one data (key informant interviews, focus group discussions) and secondary sources. Section 2.2 then presents a picture of life within these unions, specifically from the point of view of co-wife relations, householding and well-being, and draws mainly on in-depth interview data with wives. In all cases, the names of the participants have been changed to protect their privacy and security.

2.1 Framework for understanding polygamous marriage

The section outlines a legal and cultural context for marriage in the research sites, including the processes of negotiation which characterise extant marriages. The section also enumerates the bases for polygamous marriage, as articulated by the community.

2.1.1 Legal Context

There are three kinds of marriages in DRC: the customary marriage based on agreement between two families, where “bride price” (also known as dowry) is given to the bride’s family; civil marriage witnessed by civil authorities; and religious marriage. The only marriage that entails legal rights of inheritance and division of common possessions in case of separation is the civil marriage. Traditional or customary marriage is however obligatory and must be completed (and officially registered) before a civil marriage can take place.

The Family Code, dating from 1987, is the central legal tool to regulate rights within this private sphere. While it was recently revised (promulgated in July 2016), it continues to include several paragraphs that entrench discrimination against women in law. The law enshrines the husband as de jure head of household. At the same time it states that husband and wife have mutual duties and responsibility for the moral and material interests of the household and affirms that the parties should assure fidelity, respect and affection to each other.

The Family Code does not recognise polygamy. However polygamy is not criminalised in the DRC. As well as this, the Family Code recognises all children of a man to be entitled to inheritance whether born within marriage or not if paternity can be proven. On this, a mix of views was in evidence during course of field research. Some felt recognition of all children signals ‘de-facto’ recognition of polygamy. Others believed the law to be far from adequate since it provides direct grounds for protection of children, but no direct grounds for protection of wives.

While monogamy and polygamy are both present as forms of marriage in the community, the reality is that space for men and women to manoeuvre is somewhat constrained by this statutory definition of the conjugal contract. The non-possibility for recognition of a polygamous marriage for example can accentuate a woman’s vulnerability in the event of separation from or death of a husband. At the same time, the overall rate of civil marriage registration in DRC is low meaning that few women enjoy these protections from the state in any case. As well as this, even if a woman does secure her right to inheritance through registered marriage, the financial costs for taking a case to a tribunal are prohibitive.

The financial costs for taking a case to a tribunal are prohibitive.
Pressure of customary norms and fears of the social consequences of taking a case to court, including with regard to a woman’s relationships with her in-laws, may hold a woman back. In these ways, even where provisions for state protection are in place, the question of access to justice is a complex one (Gouzou et al for SIDA, 2009).

While statutory law and the judiciary play a role in codifying and regulating the marriage contract in DRC, other social institutions play a significant role and their interpretation of what constitutes conjugal relations can differ. Traditional chiefs (as well as those nominated to take up leadership positions at village level) for example play an important role in the settlement of disputes within and between families including marital conflict (Gaynor, 2014) and they will recognise plural wives.15

Alongside customary law, religious institutions also play an instrumental role in shaping and regulating marriage norms. As has been mentioned a significant proportion of the population in and around Mambasa town are Muslim and adhere to Sharia family law which allows men to marry up to 4 wives. The Catholic and Protestant Churches however do not recognise polygamous marriages and primary data suggests that locally, they will go as far as advising men and women to leave such marriages. There were several accounts (in both Mambasa and Djugu) of Catholic parents not accepting that a daughter sleeps at their house for example because she was not ‘married’ in the eyes of the church and therefore living in sin. Another woman spoke of how she was no longer permitted to sing in a choir because of her second wife status. At the same time however, one woman (a first wife, Catholic) was very active in her church and was a reader, suggesting that first wife can be recognised as the ‘legitimate’ one by Church leaders to the exclusion of others who are existing.

2.1.2 MARRIAGE NORMS

When it comes to marriage, there is a huge diversity of cultural norms within DRC, which can be based on religion, ethnicity but also on geography (including whether urban or rural based).16 Diversity in cultural norms is evident in the ethnically diverse localities of Nizi (Djugu) and Mambasa town. For example in Mambasa town the Nande (who originate from North Kivu) do not have the tradition of polygamy, while the Budu most expressly do; in generations past Budu men were known to have up to 12 wives. What the research data suggests is some general and shared norms around marriage including polygamy, and differing perspectives on the practice of the latter.

Irrespective of the diversity of marriage, a consistent finding was the social value that is placed on marriage, particularly for women who are overwhelmingly defined by themselves and others as being ‘married with children’. A woman who needs to leave a marriage may be able to do so if she has the social support of her family and some financial autonomy but for a woman who has neither, stepping out of a marriage can be extremely challenging if not unsupportable, both socially and practically. In DRC, the primacy of woman’s role as wife and mother curtails women’s capacity to exercise autonomy both within and outside of marriage.

‘Bride Price’

One norm that can be said to be general and shared and irrespective of whether a marriage is monogamous or polygamous (signalling customary recognition of polygamous marriage), is payment of ‘bride price’ (referred to as ‘dot’ in DRC French).17

While it is objectifying for women, ‘bride price’ exists to cement agreement between two families and ensure that husband and wife conduct themselves in accordance with customary norms. In this way, it arises in extant marriage disputes and negotiations.

15. Customary law may be subordinate to statutory law in the Constitution but is thought to settle as much as 75% of all local level disputes in the DRC (Le Sort des Tribunaux Coutumiers se Discute à l’Assemblée Nationale, Radio Okapi [Dem. Rep. Congo], June 9th 2010, available at: http://radiookapi.net/tr%C3%A9sor/2010/06/09/le-sort-des-tribunaux-coutumiers-se-discute-a-l%E2%80%99assembl%C3%A9e-nationale). The traditional governance system in Ituri both Mambasa and Djugu is formally sub-divided into a number of ‘collectivités’ administered by Chefferies or Chiefdoms (there is a parallel administrative structure) with the Chief of the Chiefdom coming from the reigning family (generally this passes from father to eldest son or sometimes eldest daughter if there is no son).

16. Among the Bakongo people (Western region of DRC) there is a tradition of matrilineal societies while in other areas of the country including Ituri and big urban centres, patrilineal societies predominate. Notably, in the case of matrilineal societies in pre-colonial times, women had a certain degree of power in that it was they who transmitted membership of the clan to their children. These were never matriarchal societies however (power of decision making would lie with woman’s maternal uncle or brother). (Freedman, J. [2016]).

17. ‘Bride Price’ is a term to denote the price (in money, assets, property) paid by the bridegroom (or his family) to the bride’s family (parents, or head of family). In anthropological literature this price has been interpreted as a way for the woman’s family/kin group to recoup the loss of her fertility and ability to work within the family unit. Members of the research team also described its function as thus. At the same time, in the context of the research sites, the price seemed to be more nominal/attainable and a way for the bridegroom to prove that he is serious about and prepared to support his bride.
For example, in the case of an act or repeated acts of physical violence or neglect perpetrated by a husband against wife and deemed by the community to be excessive, a woman’s family may intervene and the question of ‘bride price’ will arise. If bride price had not initially been sought by the wife’s family then at that point he may be required to pay it in order to secure her return. If ‘bride price’ had been sought and paid, then it will be deemed that the agreement was not respected and he may have to pay a fine. In some cases a family may judge it better that their daughter not return to the marriage at all. While there may then be a dispute as to whether a previously paid ‘bride price’ should be returned, this is something that the woman’s family can challenge on the basis of husband’s conduct.

Interviewees gave a number of examples of situations in which family had intervened, signalling recognition (by family) of their conjugal contract within a polygamous union. As well as this, interviewee accounts suggested that a conjugal contract can be established even in cases where ‘bride price’ is not paid. There were varying determinations within the data. For example one interviewee said that while a small number of goats had been given to her family, ‘bride price’ had not been paid. Another interviewee said that a small number of goats had been given to her family as partial payment and that the husband had promised to pay the rest later (i.e. in both cases something was given but it varied as to whether this constituted ‘bride price’, partial ‘bride price’ or neither).

For some interviewees, non-payment was a source of insecurity in part because payment of ‘bride price’ signifies recognition of marriage by respective families, something that is important for everyday well being but also in the event of abuse, or where the death of a spouse occurs. Women are particularly vulnerable in the case of latter (death of spouse) since responsibility for children arising out of a relationship will fall to them first, and because a woman’s access to land, property is primarily contingent on her being (recognised as) wife.

As noted above, primary data indicates that there is variance in ‘bride price’ practice (i.e. non-payment is common, or symbolic payment only with promise of more to come), a factor which is reflective of changing socio-economic conditions and marriage norms more generally. In the context of widespread poverty and unemployment for young men for example, it can be difficult for young couples to secure the funds required to get married (Gouzou et al for Sida, 2009). Research conducted by SIDA in 2009 reported this as a factor that has led to an increase of “come-let-us-stay-together marriages” (yakatofanda) i.e. situations of co-habiting where proper procedure with family and custom has not been observed. In other cases a pregnancy can spark co-habitation, a factor that brings the bride price ‘bargaining’ position of the woman’s family down.

Patterns of work can also be a driver of “come-let-us-stay-together marriages”. Discussions with miners in both Mambasa and Djugu revealed that it is not uncommon for married men working away from home to strike up relations with women in and around the mines. While a conjugal contract may arise out of such relations (‘bride price’ may be paid at a later date, or children may be born and be supported by the man) ‘marriage’ is not always the outcome. This may be because the relations are conceived from the outset as temporal (i.e. lasting as long as the man is mining in that location). From a researcher perspective, the ambiguity of such relations is compounded by the fact that the word for wife in French, ‘femme’ (and its equivalent in Swahili, ‘Bibi’) also means ‘woman’. This can make it difficult to know whether a third party is talking about another person’s wife or their girlfriend. At the same time, participants in FGDs were able to make the distinction. For example, in Mambasa there was reference to young men going to work in the mines ‘leaving their wives here and taking another in the mines – without any ‘dot’; they separate when he comes back’ (FGD, Mambasa, 12.07.16). In this instance the word ‘femme’ was used but at the same time the participant made a point of qualifying the contract by saying that no ‘dot’ (‘bride price’) was paid and that the contract is temporal since they separate when he returns home.

While the women and men who participated in later stage in-depth interviews with the research team articulated lasting contracts based on ongoing exchange over years and while these form the basis for this report’s discussion of polygamy, it is important to acknowledge that temporal, circumstantial kinds of relations were also articulated as ‘polygamy’ by members of the community and that these can sometimes be the basis for more long term kinds of relationships.

18. In some parts of the DRC, a certain level of violence (certainly not life threatening) is considered a normal part of marital relations. In a 2007 DHS survey 70% of women interviewed felt that one or more of these reasons justified a man beating his wife: burning a meal, arguing with him, going out without telling him, neglecting the children, or refusing to have sex with him. The general subordination of women is linked to ideals of masculinity (superior/head of the family) and femininity (inferior/submission) with domestic violence being a way to reproduce and maintain these power relations. Cases of domestic violence rarely go to court; legal routes are typically taken only when the violence resulted in the death of the victim. Rape within the marriage is not viewed as a crime (even if it is criminalised according the law on sexual violence) and is neither treated between families or within the court system (Davis et al, 2014).
2.1.3 POLYGAMOUS MARRIAGE

Irrespective of statutory law, and the position of social institutions such as church, polygamous marriages in the communities under review appear to be fairly common place. From interviews and focus group discussions it was clear that communities in both Mambasa and Djugu have a lot of knowledge regarding how men and women in polygamy organise themselves, stemming from personal experience and the experiences of neighbours. Participants in interview and discussion estimated the prevalence (in both Mambasa and Djugu) to be 1 in 3 marriages approximately. DHS survey data from 2013-14 puts the prevalence rate for Ituri province at around 25%.19

**Bases for plural wife arrangements**

Primary data revealed ‘customary bases’ for a man to take a second or third wife, with ‘customary basis’ meaning a reason that is articulated as ‘traditionally being the way’ (like any norm, these bases are not necessarily accepted without question, and their meaning has changed with time). There are a number of important points to make about all of these (and other) bases:

1. They signify the tension between customary law and statutory law, between customary law and religious teachings.
2. They constitute the basis for the conjugal contract. In other words, why two people come together in marriage will have a determining effect on their respective experiences of the marriage. This was very evident from the primary data.
3. The customary bases were articulated explicitly by men during the course of key informant interviews and focus group discussions. Women in these same discussions spoke more about the experiences of women in polygamous marriages.20

**Customary Bases**

- A second wife might be sought to assist the family because the first wife is often unwell. This can follow a recommendation from the husband’s family (for example an older sister can advise her younger brother to marry again);
- A second or third wife might be sought if existing wife/wives have not given birth to children. Customarily the new wife will come from the family of the existing wife, and can be chosen by the first wife;
- A second wife might be sought to assist with receiving of guests and management of the home; this situation appears common among local chiefs, who receive many guests/visitors as part of their function.

From the primary data, these bases seem to translate into relatively clear terms for new and existing wives, something which appears to make negotiation and positioning within the marriage easier for them. In such cases, it appears more likely that the husband seeks consent or at least informs his other wives about the new wife for example; it is more likely that he will inform his new wife that he has other wives; it is more likely that there will be discussions between the respective families and that ‘bride price’ will be paid at the outset. This is not to say that the path of wives within such arrangements is oiled and smooth. As subsequent sections show, wives in these marriages will still face resistance from co-wives, as well as other challenges.

**Other bases**

Other bases evoked by respondents were more to do with attitudes and behaviours (and changes in these). They incurred more judgement among respondents and included a husband taking another wife because he perceived the ‘character’ or ‘behaviour’ of the first to be less than desirable, as well more fluid engagements originating in for example extra marital relations.

For the former (character/behaviour judgement) the notion of ‘not being enough’ (for a husband) can be internalised by women. In a focus group discussion in Mambasa, one woman said: ‘If you don’t look after your husband well, well then he will take another wife... if for example asks you to prepare some food for him and you don’t do it in time, and when you don’t know how to ‘keep the bed’ well the man will be obliged to take another wife.’ (FGD, Mambasa, 12.07.16).

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20. Mid way through a mixed focus group discussion in Mambasa, one man said to the women assembled ‘You women have a lot to say about polygamy.’ A woman replied saying ‘If it were polyandry we were talking about, then I think you men would have a lot to say.’ (FGD, Mambasa, 12.07.16).
We can understand this as part of the armoury of ‘threat’ that a husband is in a position to hold over his wife i.e. if you don’t do x, or if you don’t change in x way then I will get another wife.

The other key basis (‘clandestine’ extra marital relations subsequently formalised and sometimes because of pregnancy) engenders a certain amount of ambiguity. This was articulated by an FGD participant in Mambasa who said:

“This polygamy starts with concubinage of the women until the woman comes to live in the household.” (FGD, Mambasa, 12.07.16).

While greyer than some of the other justifying factors the data suggests that this is quite a common basis (i.e. the relations start out as informal and are subsequently formalised). It came out particularly strongly in Djugu and was linked, by respondents, to the movements and practices of men who travel to a secondary location for mining work. This basis can mean less certain terms and conditions for the women entering into the marriage as shown in the following account of interviewee Faida.21

Faida, (second wife) was seeing a man, became pregnant after a time and then became his wife. No ‘bride price’ was ever paid to her family. 8 years into the marriage she still struggles to assert and enjoy a strong position within the marriage. It was only when she discovered she was pregnant that her (now) husband told her he had another wife. At first he denied paternity of the child; when her parents challenged him, he agreed to a marriage. Faida’s husband frequently reminds her that she is second wife. Where other interviewees did not express huge concern with the non-payment of ‘bride price’, Faida sees it as a sign that her husband’s commitment to her is not very strong. She tolerates heavy drinking, aggression and violence as well:

“When I say I am going to call my parents he gets madder than you can imagine, so I hold back from saying anything. He wants that I don’t say a word.”

The basis for Riziki’s marriage was similar (pregnancy) but her experience has been different. This is possibly due to the fact that she bore her husband a son. The esteem in which she is held and which she enjoys is possibly tied up with her capacity to bear children:

Riziki, 30 (third wife) found out that her now husband was already married (with two wives) when she became pregnant five years ago. He told her about his other wives when she told him of the news of the pregnancy. He took this to mean that she would be his wife and once she gave birth to the baby he came to her family. She is now living in a house, separate from his other two wives. She lives there with two children from her previous marriage and the son she has with her husband. The second wife often says to Riziki: ‘You are a star for our husband because you have this child’. He has also been very welcoming of her other children. According to Riziki: ‘He receives these children as if they were his own’.

The role of wider family/kin in extant marriages

Involvement of wider family/kin in extant marriages is an important aspect and signifier of the conjugal contract, and appears to function as it would with monogamous marriages. As mentioned, the data shows that an initial payment (even if it is symbolic) brings obligations that family will follow up on. Again this will vary from place to place, and be contingent on relations within and circumstances of families but in cases of domestic violence considered excessive and/or life threatening, or neglect for example, the data shows that a wife’s family may intervene. None of the interviewees spoke of their family judging them for being in, or counselling them to leave, polygamous marriages. They spoke instead about family support/intervention, or their own inability to leave their marriage because of absence of other options.

Almost all of the women interviewed described leaving a marriage (prior ones or their current one) at one time or another, invoking family for support/intervention. In most cases the women described returning to their husbands after receiving counsel from the family and after their husband had paid a fine and apologised. There were 3 cases in which the wives did not return, and these were all cases of ‘neglect’.22 Indeed, the accounts reveal the factors that will lead to a woman’s decision to leave the ‘foyer’ including (repeated acts of) violence considered to be excessive or life threatening, neglect, the entry of a new wife into the foyer, conflict with/threats from co-wife.23

The interviewees also evoked factors which reduce

21. All names have been changed.
22. Neglect, as described by interviewees, referred to long absences or failure to inform wife’s family when wife is sick.
23. These are all actual reasons why interviewees left marriages at one point or another (in some cases they spoke of prior marriages, not their existing one).
the possibility of a woman being able to make such a decision. These include lack of means within her own family (to support her and her dependents), pressure from her own family to endure, threats from her husband, perceived low level of education, limited social networks (leading to social isolation in everyday life), responsibility for young children (i.e. still dependent).

**Social and economic autonomy**

Kabeer (1994) describes autonomy as 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. Drawing on autonomy in this sense, a woman’s autonomy (to leave an unhappy or abusive marriage for example) can be limited by the social and economic conditions in which she finds herself. For example, Faida (second wife) doesn’t feel like she has much power in her marriage. She is frequently reminded of her second wife status by her husband who was compelled to marry her by her family after she became pregnant; he perpetrates physical violence against her; on one occasion he beat her until she was unconscious. While she did leave for her family at that point (and stayed for 3 months until he came and apologised and paid a fine) she was obliged by her family to return. Her husband has not kept his promise to stop drinking and beating her.

Another interviewee, Naomi, 29 (third wife) was previously married and has dependents to support. She feels extremely unhappy in her current marriage (‘in a desert’) but knows that while her family cares for her and loves her, they are simply unable to support her and her children because of their economic situation.

As well as these reasons, the ‘single-woman’ status is difficult to bear in the context of DRC. As mentioned a woman who is well supported by her family may be able to bear the label of ‘single woman’, but for a woman who can’t count on that support, stepping out of a marriage into ‘single-woman status’ can be extremely challenging. While two interviewees left their husbands and spent a number of years living with their parents before marrying again, another woman spoke of how she married again quite quickly after the breakup of her first marriage because she didn’t want to be seen as a ‘prostitute’.

A number of interviewees initially returned to their parents when they discovered a new wife but were always encouraged, after a time (and payment of fine) to return. The sister of one (to whom she fled) said, after her husband came, ‘You didn’t come here so that I could destroy your marriage. You need to go back’. The accounts show how, for women at least, kinship relations operate to both limit and extend their options and capacity for individuation or personhood.
This section has drawn on primary data and secondary sources to outline the legal and cultural context for polygamy in localities where the research was carried out. In spite of the non-recognition of polygamy in statutory law in DRC, the data clearly displays the ways in which polygamy is common in the localities where research was carried out. Bases for such marriages are rooted in custom and family/kin will play a role in extant marriages. Such marriages are also reflective of changing social norms.

What is also clear from the primary data is that plural wife arrangements bring the contingent nature of the status ‘wife’ to the fore as well as the tenuous protections that statute law affords her. While the terms and conditions underpinning any conjugal contract in the context of DRC are unequal, the contingency of these terms and conditions is possibly more accented in a plural wife setting where the basis for the marriage may be tenuous, and where there is prospect for competing claims on a daily and longer term basis. These points emerge in the following section which presents and discusses in depth data in an effort to further build a picture of life in these unions.

2.2 Life in polygamy

Section 2.2 presents and discusses data gathered through in-depth interview with 18 women. It builds a picture of life within polygamous unions, specifically from the point of view of relations, house-holding and well-being, and draws mainly on in-depth interview data. The interview data is referred to in the following discussion as the women’s ‘accounts’.

A number of themes were identified in the accounts and they have been organised under three sections. Firstly, the accounts evoked key dimensions of the conjugal contract, namely expectation of presence of husband (this is significant in these localities where segmented foyers are common) and house-holding (including food production, income generating activities and consumption).

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24. Discussion has been supported with data gathered via KII, FGD and interviews with men in polygamous unions.

25. The majority of the women interviewed live in segmented arrangements, meaning that while they live near a co-wife or to co-wives, they do not share dwelling space or land. At the same time a small number of the women interviewed lived in non-segmented arrangements (i.e. the wives stayed together under one roof or in one compound) or had prior experience of non-segmented arrangements.
Secondly, while segmented foyers appear to be in the majority in the localities reviewed this in no way means that co-wife relations are non-existent or irrelevant. According to accounts, the level and nature of interaction with co-wives is significant and can range from cordial to acrimonious. Additionally there is the question of hierarchy; while the accounts imply a de-facto senior rank for first wives, interviewees also conveyed the ways in which influence within the foyer is not wholly contingent on rank. Section 2.2.3 concludes by drawing on data pertaining to presence, house-holding and co-wife relations to discuss the women's accounts in relation to Kabeer's concept of well being.

Throughout this section, women's age (where it was given) and position in the marriage (first, second, third) is repeated in order to reveal something of the interplay between age, position and experience of the marriage. In all cases names of interviewees have been changed to protect their privacy and security.

### 2.2.1 PRESENCE AND HOUSE-HOLDING

The presence and (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’ (White 1981, pp. 80).26 The expectation that a husband will equitably partition time and resources between wives exemplifies the particularity of plural wife arrangements. What emerges from the accounts is the extent to which a husband will adhere to this principle and the dynamics that are generated around these aspects more generally.

#### Presence

In both Mambasa and Djugu, the segmented foyer appears to be more common than non-segmented arrangement. With this, the expectation that a husband be present regularly and consistently was evident in the accounts, and was reiterated by women in Lopa who said:

> The husband often has a fixed program. Wives will know when he should be passing by them. (Women only FGD, Lopa, 26.08.16)

A number of women described what this program entailed. From the accounts, 3 days in one house and 3 days in another appears common. If the husband works away he might spend one night with each wife upon his return and then revert to a 3 day-3 day programme. For wives that are co-habiting, time is also divided in a similar way though they face particular challenges. Esperance, 35 (second wife) explained how after her night with the husband, first wife Francine, 38 will go the whole day without talking to her even though they have lived together for 7 years.

While there is this desire and expectation among wives that the husband be with them on a regular and consistent basis, the reality is different. The women described how a husband could ‘break the rule’ when ‘there is a problem with the other’ or when the other is sick.

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26. From the DRC data a wife, as part of the conjugal contract, will (come to) accept the fact of another wife or wives, and during the course of a life cycle may take care of children from other wives where they are the children of her husband. Women also spoke of helping another co-wife if she needed financial assistance or food but this is in principle rather than practice (they said they would be willing but had never been approached). In short, while women will recognise and engage with other wives (and there may even be affinity over time) the data conveyed the sense of wives having duties and obligations towards their husband and own children primarily (and vice versa), and that this didn’t extend to other wives in the foyer.
Maisha, 32 (third wife) described an instance of being caught up in what was happening between her husband and a co-wife:

One day he was at my place and at the time he was in conflict with his other wife. When the rain started I asked him, are you not going to go and he responded saying that he wasn’t going to go and that I should stop disturbing him. Two, three days passed and he hadn’t gone because he really had fought with her. The wife came to find him at my place but the husband stayed, without moving.

There were also examples given of where a husband, to account for his whereabouts, will say that he had been with a co-wife even if he has not. Nathalie, 32 (third wife):

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

Maisha, 32 (third wife) explained that if a husband does break the rule it’s one of the things that wives find difficult to forget:

...because she knows when it is her day and all she does is count the days that pass. When it is the first time you can accept but the second, third, fourth time you will finish by asking him the question.

At the same time the accounts show that it is not easy for a wife to ask questions of her husband, especially in relation to whereabouts. Faida (second wife) talked about a general reluctance to ask any kind of question for fear of aggravating her husband. Other women described incidents where they were beaten or threatened with beating with asking questions relating to whereabouts, another wife or relationship. These incidents can also be triggers for break up. One example of this was given by Ana, 55 (first wife) who described going to a family funeral with her husband and his (new) wife. At the end of the day the husband and new wife left the funeral without informing Ana and she was left to ask the proprietor what she should do. It was only when Ana got home and found her husband and the new wife that she realised they had left without telling her. She felt humiliated and asked him why he had done so but this questioning sparked a row which led to her being badly beaten and leaving for her sister’s house. Ana hasn’t returned to the house since the incident, though the local Chief has ordered that the husband pay a fine. She expressed a desire to return to the house to claim what she feels is partly hers after so many years of marriage (she had four plots with her husband, and 8 children). At the same time she is aware that she has been driven out by her husband and his new wife, and that it will be a struggle to secure any assets from the house, or financial support from her husband.

In short, while there are expectations of regular and consistent presence, it is difficult for wives to hold their husband to this. This is not only because he has other responsibilities but because of the unequal terms of the contract. Wives are very aware that asking questions about a husband’s whereabouts can aggravate, or trigger conflict. They are aware that a husband can use force against them for doing this and that questioning could drive him to spend longer spells of time away. At the same time, presence was important for many of the interviewees (particularly those with dependent children). Presence is the means by which the women sustain intimacy with their husbands, as well as ongoing access to resources (land, income). A number of them said ‘I feel at ease when he’s around’.

House-holding

Along with the expectation of presence, there is the expectation that a husband contributes to the household, in the form of a place to live, access to land, cash for medical bills and school fees and possibly with labour as well (even if this is indirectly by way of hiring day workers). The women’s accounts show that access to land is a primary expectation of marriage, a way to secure food and fulfil a conjugal function within the foyer (and possibly her future as well, since she is making a contribution to a family asset through her labour).27

27. Apart from two exceptions, there were no cases among the interviewees of land being in a woman’s name; they had access only but not ownership. In terms of access to land and irrespective of rank, most women interviewed had access to land through their husband. There were three cases where women did not have access to land. In two of these cases they were aware that other wives were also not accessing land (and so it was related to limited means of the husband). The third case was Naomi (third wife), a woman who for reasons previously outlined, does not feel secure or happy in her marriage. In Naomi’s case she understands that the first wife has access to land, and is receiving inputs from the husband. While she receives sufficient ‘rations’ from her husband, she engages in no income generating activities and the situation leaves her feeling like she’s ‘in a desert’.

POLYGAMY · DRC

TRÓCAIRE JUNE 2017
**Food production and allocations**

With regard to assistance with plots (linked to their obligations as ‘proprietor’), some husbands were described as being consistent and equitable. Natalie, 32 (third wife)’s husband for example provides 6 people regularly, 2 per wife and to help with ‘the more difficult work’. The contributions of other husbands, according to their wives, were more ad hoc however and overall contributions varied. Atosha, 30 (first wife) has called upon her family on numerous occasions for example to put pressure on her husband to work on the land. He has worked on the land as a result of this intervention, she explained, but it is an ongoing battle. Atosha says that his typical response to her is ‘I can’t do two jobs’ (i.e. mining and farm).

From the accounts, it is difficult to generalise about how produce from fields is then managed and allocated (for household consumption, re-sale or distribution to other wives). In some cases the women described production levels as being fairly low, meaning that the produce served for household consumption only and remained within her control. Where there was excess, women’s role in decision making varied. In some cases women exercised autonomy (i.e. husband didn’t get involved). In these cases the women were mostly either older and/or with independent access to land or property. Where a husband was present regularly enough and where the land was in his name, the extent to which a wife played a role in decision making around excess appeared lower:

Noella, 20 (second wife):

> He is the one who gives directives in relation to management of produce and money. One time we managed to save some money through sale of maize. With the money he bought a moto and was opening a taxi. A little while later he wanted to sell the moto. I didn’t react, I just asked why he would want to sell the moto. He replied saying that it’s because motos cause a lot of accidents and if he was to continue to use it as a taxi, he could no longer come to the fields. With the money he got from the sale of the moto he just bought me some clothes.

In Noella’s case while they earned the money together, it was invested in an asset that was then sold without her view being sought. Moreover while she did get something in return, it did not reflect the value of the sale. Noella does not know what he did with the balance (he may have shared it with the first wife for example).

Overall, the extent of a wife’s bargaining power will be linked to aspects which have been raised in the previous sections including basis for the marriage and support of wider family, as well as age and whether she herself has assets.

A significant aspect related to the question of allocation and possible distribution to other wives is that because women work their own plots, what is grown by them is understood to be for their use, their husband and children and not for co-wives. While instances of one wife helping out another were mentioned, the produce from one plot is not pooled with the produce of other plots. A number of women in interview (but more in women’s discussions) described pooling/redistribution of produce for consumption as something that is resisted by wives:

Angelique, 36 (second wife):

> I refuse that produce from my field goes to Katoto. I don’t like it and I never liked it.

By describing these acts of resistance it is clear that in some cases a husband will attempt to take away produce to bring to another wife. Indeed, in all three locations in Djugu women made it very clear that pooling across households was not something they tolerated.28 One woman articulated it thus:

> While a husband is entitled to a share of the harvest, the harvest of one wife should never be used to solve the problems of another. (Women only FGD, Djugu, 24.08.16).

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

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28. From discussions in Djugu it appeared that relations between co-wives in these areas (even in segmented foyers) can be fraught and rivalry between wives is heightened. It may be related to the fragility of the conjugal contracts, as described in Djugu key informant interviews and focus group discussions.
One case of refusal recounted in Djugu was as follows:

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

Income

Instances where husbands were perceived to be providing for all within the foyer, and in an equitable manner, were rare among interviewees. Firstly, the primary activity for many of the husbands of women interviewed was mining, meaning extended periods of time away (particularly for those in Mambasa since the camps are located further away) as well as irregular and unpredictable flows of income. There was little evidence of this or any other such income being presented to wives.

Common in accounts were situations whereby the husband would draw on his income to provide for family members but without revealing amounts earned. Noella, 20 (second wife):

“It’s the husband alone who sells it (coal) and he keeps the money in his pocket – he never lets us know what he gets. This is why neither I nor the first wife ever know his capital. He is the only one who knows in his situation in terms of money.”

This was echoed by Francine, 38 (first wife):

“He can just say to you that he has some and you’re going to hear that but you will never see this money. And this is the same manner with the other wife. She can hear that he has some money with her ears but she won’t see it because he keeps it in his pocket. If he comes with a bit of money then we’ll eat directly but if he has a bit well then we’ll buy a basin of flour, oil, coal. That is what he will show us.”

Esperance, 35 (second wife):

“The things he brings, he can equally bring them secretly. Sometimes for example he brings me bags of bread. Maybe it’s my ‘turn’ and we all eat the bread together. It can also be that he brings things secretly to the other. It’s a husband of two wives. We can’t know his position.

For the women it varied as to whether they disclosed their incomes to their husband. For some there was a sense that it was what they had to do, even if their husband did not do the same:

Sara, 57 (first wife):

“I present all my money to my husband. He does ask me questions about it. When he goes to the mines he doesn’t communicate his capital, even when I ask him he will say he has nothing. But all the same he’ll bring something to meet the needs of the family.”

For Riziki, 30 (third wife), a more collaborative approach was in evidence. Riziki is fairly confident in her marriage and is confident about her relationship with her husband:

“With the money that I make from sale of beer it’s me who keeps it but I never use it without asking his point of view, and he never refuses.”

In other cases, and this seemed most common, women manage finances separately from their husbands, a factor that seems to be bound up with the extent of his physical presence and consistency (or otherwise) of his provisioning. In cases where the husband was not perceived to sufficiently provide (not consistently at least) the women kept their income to themselves and this practice seemed to be largely accepted by the husband. Atosha, 30 (first wife) described a husband who provided very little:

29. In an interview in Bunia town in July 2016, a human rights activist and first wife said that in such instances women need to be strong and refuse for produce/goods to be redistributed. “Women need to be liberated and they need to secure their economic autonomy. Women need to develop the capacity to say no. Society may recognise man as chief of household but it doesn’t tolerate you taking from one to give to another. That is pure masculine hegemony’ (Bunia, July 2016).

30. 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 (Kabeer, 1994).
My money from the chikwangue\textsuperscript{31} I look after myself. He knows my capital – he will ask sometimes for money for tobacco and I’ll give it. We don’t do any financial planning together.

In terms of supporting each other, a number of women said that while they had never been asked for help by another co-wife (for a loan of money for example) and while they had never asked for help themselves, they would help out if asked. At the same time it is noteworthy that none of the women reported ever asking, and some talked of other wives having difficulty accepting help.

Most of the women interviewed were living in segmented foyers and part of this means having a separate plot and dwelling space from the other co-wives. In general a woman will work this plot on her own (with variable contributions from her husband) and will exercise a variable degree of influence over how it is used. In terms of excess produce, if a woman has her own access to land or if the husband is away most of the time then she will exercise some autonomy over allocation of this excess. Otherwise the husband is de jure ‘head of house’ and this makes it difficult for most to manoeuvre; efforts to influence may end up in conflict or even physical confrontation.

For income and spending there is, as noted above, a “non-corporatedness”, a separation of economies,\textsuperscript{32} meaning that husbands will often earn and contribute to the household but without disclosing the amount and likewise the women. One aspect of this non disclosure is that women do not know what their husband has earned overall and whether he is distributing equitably across the foyer.

The irregular and fluctuating nature of the husband’s income (as miner) is a key factor here. This factor combined with the practice of non disclosure can help explain why many of these women engage in income generating activities in addition to farming and why they also practice non disclosure. Interestingly, the accounts of older women demonstrated how they had been able to accrue wealth within marriage or between marriages. Factors here included an absent husband combined with the fact of a good education and/ or time to invest in business because they did not have children or dependents. Generally however a woman will always have less opportunity than her husband to accumulate wealth (money or assets).

This is because of the subordinate position they occupy within the marriage and society (for example to what extent she can access means to generate income, or reliably secure an asset), less available time since she is producing food and managing the house and lastly because income that she does bring in is first and foremost absorbed as part of everyday household consumption. This is particularly the case where there are dependent children.

Overall, where the husband is transparent and has systems in place he will, according to women, ensure benefits accrue equitably over time and across the foyer. This however was very rare in the accounts. More common is for women to use influence to negotiate a return, or for women who do not have this leverage or capacity, to remain with little say over decisions and within a complex and opaque plural wife arrangement. The accounts also show that resource allocation (by husband) is competitive and commonly insufficient (insufficiency was more common than any perception that it was ‘unequal’). Women’s responses to this vary and depend on aspects previously mentioned including age, financial autonomy, support of wider family, and whether or not they have dependents (young children).

2.2.2 CO-WIFE RELATIONS

With segmented foyers in the majority, one could conclude that ‘co-wife relations’ play out in the form of indirect competition for presence of spouse and allocations. However the accounts demonstrate that relations extend beyond this. They convey direct experiences of and relations between co-wives, as well as how these relations determine experience of the marriage overall, including influence.

Relations between co-wives depend in part on living arrangements. In cases where the foyer is non-segmented the interaction will be daily. In cases where the foyer is segmented the level of interaction will depend on spatial factors like whether the women farm in the same field, or go to the same market. It can also depend on whether a husband is proactive in fostering connection between wives.

Whatever the level and nature of interaction, women keep abreast of who the other wife is/wives are, where they are at a given time and, as far as possible, their relationship with their common husband.

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31. Chikwangue is a paste made from manioc root – steamed over fire in banana leaf and commonly eaten with fish or meat.
32. See footnote 30, above.
Within a plural wife foyer, it is important that a wife knows and understands the position of other actors in the marriage. It is through her ongoing relations with spouse as well as these co-wives that a woman securitizes her present and her future. Any accounts of co-wife relations, including conflict, must be understood as such.

Since segmented arrangements were more common among those interviewed, this is the arrangement that underpins much of the discussion below. At the same time, many of the points are applicable to non-segmented arrangements and aspects particular to non-segmented arrangements are important to note as well.

**Cordiality and everyday navigation**

Riziki, 30 (third wife) spoke of how, as part of the conjugal contract, she is expected to accept the other wives in her husband’s life. This principle of acceptance extends to cordial relations. In some cases this can mean spending time with co-wives and/or their children and can generate affection between women including affection for each other’s children.34 A husband may expect or foster these kinds of relations among wives. This was especially notable among marriages where the basis had been customary (see section 2.1).34 Cordial relations are also relations that a woman may foster herself in the interests of progressing her own well being and that of her children.

One way in which cordial relations among co-wives is given expression is appellations. In most cases the wives call each other respectful names such as Maman Leki, Mama Mukubwa (Big sister in Lingalla/ Swahili).35 These cordial appellations however belie deeper feelings and insecurities. They point to the strategic, everyday navigation that is required of wives within plural wife foyers, and exemplified in the following accounts. Significantly, in interview, women called their co-wives ‘Mbanda’ (meaning rival).

**Riziki**

While she addresses her respectfully, Riziki, 30 (third wife) describes a neighbouring co-wife as someone who is always trying to ‘provoke’ her. She mentions how she avoids spending too much time with the co-wife because of this and because she judges that her husband wouldn’t be able to manage a direct conflict very well:

> It’s not great because Maman Jean has said to me that the day we fight is the day she’ll feel at ease. And me I say to myself that if she comes to attack me well then we’ll fight. The husband knows this is the case but doesn’t do anything....

There is also a level of discomfort linked to the fact that Riziki has one son with the husband while the second wife has had no children with the husband. Again it leaves Riziki on her guard, and with a certain level of discomfort:

> She has never asked me for Jean and that would disturb me because if she were to go with him I’d be worried that she might do him harm so if she was to ask I might have to say no.

**Nathalie**

Nathalie, 32 (third wife) describes an organised and quite controlling husband, and very cordial relations with her co-wives (she links the two things in fact). All three wives work in a field provided by the husband (divided into portions) meaning that while the foyer is segmented they have a regular meeting place. She also describes how she pays them visits and how her children go to their compound and are received well there. Nathalie has accumulated experience from prior marriages. She speaks of previous co-wives that she refused to tolerate (she left one husband on account of the second wife he took) or that she feared (a co-wife was involved in sorcery).36 She attributes the relative calm that permeates her relations with these current co-wives to her husband’s active management of relations within the foyer.

33. Examples of affinity included an interviewee talking about how close she was to the daughter of her co-wife (now grown). The same interviewee talked about how she was lucky to have found this first wife when she joined as second wife since they got on so well and she was aware that others didn’t. Other examples included a third wife who got on very well with the children of the second wife. This second wife lived in another city but when her children come to visit their father they always call to see this third wife and see how she is doing, something which she likes very much.
34. The research team conducted an in depth interview with a local Chief who has two wives. He enumerated the challenges of meeting the expectations of both wives (particularly the second whose ‘disadvantage’ on account of coming in second and not yet having a nice big house like the first, he is acutely aware of). The local Chief described the steps he has taken to foster good relations between them.
35. There were two instances of women who called their husband’s other wife after their own children since this other wife had not had any, or had lost her only child. For example Riziki, 30 (third wife) calls her co-wife Maman Jean (being the mother of a son, Jean). This is what she calls the childless co-wife who lives nearby (as a mark of respect). According to accounts, instances where face to face appellations were not respectful would be rare - an indication that relations were not good at all and that there was little pretence.
36. In the accounts there were numerous references to sorcery (including fetishes being used by one wife to lure a husband to her and away from another wife for example) and incidents of poisoning. It is not something that this research was able to explore in depth but is a factor when it comes to co-wives, especially since a wife may not see another wife as ‘relation’ or ‘family’ per say and so may be more willing to ward another wife off using (threat of) sorcery.
At the same time, and like Riziki, there are feelings which belie the calm surface. While she has borne her husband his only children and this is a source of strength for her within the marriage, it is also a source of insecurity:

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

Noella

An astute account of navigation is relayed by Noella, 20 (second wife). Noella married at the age of 16 and has two children with her husband. She met her husband when he came to her town with his father for medical treatment. He explained to her that he had been married but that his wife had left him. She returned with him to his village and while her family (in this case a brother) did follow to secure proper bride price by the time they did she was already pregnant. Payment of one goat was made to her family. After one year the first wife returned (Noella had cared for the children in her absence) and the two wives now live in separate dwellings but in the same locality. Noella says that she takes this first wife as a ‘big sister’ but qualifies that by saying that she is ‘not yet warm with her’.

When I went to hospital, my rival didn’t come and see me and me too, I don’t have the habit of going to see her when she is suffering the hospital. It is her that started this system of us not seeing each other but at the same time she was the first in hospital and I didn’t go and visit her that day.

At the same time, there is co-operation particularly around house-holding. She recounts how if one finishes harvest they will help the other but in general she says the first wife ‘will not easily accept but takes anyway’. Again, this is reflective of a carefully crafted and maintained distance. Noella remains in the marriage but with mixed feelings.

Open animosity

While some women recounted cordial relations and everyday navigation as above, others painted a picture of more open animosity. A number of these were women who entered into marriage with little means behind them (little family support, little economic means) and who have been actively undermined by senior wives. Women who lived with other wives or who had lived with other wives also recounted instances of open animosity.

Naomi and Faida

Both Naomi, 30 (third wife) and Faida (second wife) entered into marriage with limited means (limited family support, limited economic means). Naomi explains that she did not enter into this second marriage out of volition but because she had dependent children and her family could no longer support her. These circumstances (a feeling that she had little or no other choice) may explain why, unlike other third wives interviewed, she feels her ‘3 bureau’ status37. ‘I am not at ease when my husband presents me as his third wife...I am like a condemned.’ This is certainly linked to the fact that the first wife has been openly hostile:

I call her Maman Mado but she calls me ‘ulembalakayake’ (his prostitute) ... you know this is what first wives like to do – they like to call others using humiliating names... it hurts me when she calls me that. We don’t talk, me and her.

Naomi doesn’t feel comfortable with the state of separateness, and would feel more at ease if there was co-operation (she gives the example of how one might care for the children of the other):

Each stays in her corner, it doesn’t bring me joy, each one lives in the kebakeba (attention, attention), with prudence. I consider her my enemy and to avoid conflicts at say funerals each one will stay in her corner with her nduguyake (her friends) ....

37. ‘Bureau’ is a colloquial term for a wife in a plural wife arrangement. People say ‘his 3eme bureau’ for example. This term has pejorative connotations. This is because while it can denote ‘wife’ it can also be used to denote the clandestine girlfriend of a married man. The term both reflects and contributes to this potential there is for ambiguity in conjugal relations within plural wife arrangements i.e. is she a legitimate wife and is she therefore entitled to the respect and protections that custom affords a wife?
Faida (second wife) who married her husband after she became pregnant also experiences name calling:

"Me, I can have a good heart but she can be angry with me, thinking that I have stolen her home and this often creates conflict. We are not really on good terms. She can pass here or she can start to sing about me. We don't visit each other because she talks about me everywhere. So it's complicated. All this hurts me, the fact that we have this husband in common."

Both Naomi and Faida point to the ways in which the first wife tries to undermine their relationship with their husband. Naomi says that her husband can be mean with her because of pressure from the other wife, and considers him unable to manage the dynamic:

"He doesn't have the capacity to live with three wives in the home and to manage them and I don't find this very good."

Faida also describes the ways in which the first wife tries to actively undermine her relationship with the husband:

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

With regard to physical confrontation and conflict, there were a handful of examples that pertained to instances where wives were living together. In one case, the women described a number of physical fights and the triggers for them (different approaches to disciplining the children, and jealousy were cited). In another case the fight was not physical but entailed open conflict (a third wife broke rank with the first wife by cooking in the kitchen and preparing food for her children).

From the accounts it is clear that segmentation of the foyer (spatial separation) doesn’t reduce the insecurity that women experience within plural wife arrangements it simply alters it. Even where there is affinity and cordiality, deep unease can exist under the surface. As well as this the spectre of a fight or anxiety over the influence that another wife is having over the husband is perennial.

Factors which compound insecurities include the basis for the marriage (fragile bases include a woman with limited economic means who married to provide for her children from a prior marriage; an unplanned pregnancy); the level of acceptance of a new wife by a first wife (which is linked to basis for marriage); the perceived influence of a new wife (in instances for example where she has borne the only child, son or children of the husband), the failure of the husband to foster cordial relations between spouses.

**Rank vs. Influence**

From the accounts there is a sense that the senior wife has a privileged position both because she is the husband’s first wife and has been in place the longest. She may also have been the first wife to bear his children. In the cases of both Naomi and Faida (above) the ways in which first wives can use this privileged position to undermine a new wife was evident. They may name call and they will bring influence to bear on their husband (to maximise his presence and contributions to them). The husband may also use the first wife’s seniority as a starting point for distribution. While some participants in phase one (particularly the men interviewed or sharing) would say that hierarchy depends on a husband (his level of control, his preferences etc) the in-depth interview data shows that it is more complex than this. Factors such as one wife’s age relative to a co-wife, the age and gender of her children, level of family/kin support, access to/control of land, property and/or independent sources of income as well as other factors all play a role in determining a wife’s ever-shifting level of influence within a foyer.

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38. Rank refers to the order in which co-wives married their husband, and influence to the more fluid concept of social standing within the household (Ellis, 2014).
Natalie

Natalie, 32, third wife, for example enjoys a level of influence attributed to having borne her husband his only children and yet she describes the de facto seniority of the first wife within her foyer:

In terms of goods, it is the first wife to whom the husband gives, and then me and the second wife are equal. So it is the first wife who receives the goods – then she calls us and gives us the part that is ours. To collect the money from Maman Mukubwa can be a bit painful because it should be the husband himself who gives you the money but we have gotten used to it. At the same time to go collect the money from the other, it can hurt. In other words, to take money from the wife while it is the husband who should give it to you that is hurtful.39

Maisha

Likewise Maisha, 32 (third wife) recounts the return of her husband’s first wife the foyer after 15 years of being away:

When she came she found me here with the Sheikh. The Sheikh asked me to receive her as my mother, his first wife. I received her. I had two mattresses at the time. I took one and I gave it to the Sheikh. He slept on the floor with it that night since we only had a house with one room. She and myself along with my child passed the night together in the other bed.

Maisha describes life under the same roof as the first wife as fractious to the point that the first wife (and second wife who also moved in at one point) left the house a few years ago. Maisha says that she generally tried to stay out of their way and avoid provocation. She openly fought with the first wife on at least one occasion however, and her husband was called on to mediate. In this instance she evoked her right to serve food she prepared and citing her own upbringing and the needs of her children as rationale.40

Indeed, while there is de-facto seniority, a new wife can dislodge the influence of a first wife, and her sense of security within the marriage as well. Maisha is very aware of the adjustments that the first wife would have had to make when she returned to the foyer. For example Maisha had taken control of management of the household account and the first wife found this very difficult. Maisha is aware of why:

There was a point where my husband hadn’t married me yet and the wife from Kisangani hadn’t returned yet and that was the time she was the ‘big one’.

For the first wife, who she calls grandmother (quite a lot older) she also postulates:

What makes the grandmother jealous is the fact that she has passed the age of being able to have children and when I have a baby he gives me money to buy things for the children, and he buys me clothes and in seeing all this well she feels like she is being penalised.

De-facto senior rank in this case was met with what Maisha brought to the marriage. She benefits from the advantages of her youth, education, her parents influence on the Sheikh as well as family resources. At the same time and while Maisha has brought influence to bear and enjoys the affections of her husband, she remains both wary and aware of the first wife and the second wife (who was similarly unhappy about the third marriage but who lives in another city):

Actually they constitute a kind of coalition and me I remain alone and it’s why I prefer not to put too much trust in them.

Francine

On the question of displaced status, Francine, 38 (first wife) is very articulate:

I was really shocked to the core; it’s not an easy thing to accept - that your husband takes an adversary while you have caused him no offence; this situation has tormented me a lot...I was shocked to the very bottom of my heart to the point that I started to suffer from stomach pains and to this day I do because to this day I don’t understand why he felt obliged to take a second wife. I don’t understand and I am always asking myself the question in order to know why.

39. Natalie’s foyer is the only foyer out of all accounts where produce and goods were pooled and re-distributed across the different wives.

40. This was echoed in an interview with a man with 2 wives: “Women do not want that they are managed in the pot of others”, he explained.
Francine also had to accept changes in household management:

> When we started the marriage it wasn't the same. He brought all the money, we counted it together and it was me who kept it. If he had need of something he would call me and we would decide together the amount needed. Everything changed once he took this girl.

She still asserts her status as first wife (we can see this echoed in her own accounts but also those of Esperance):

> In terms of purchase of plots, he should begin with purchase for the older children and for that which concerns the wives he should start with me.

Lastly and from discussions at community level, first wife de-facto seniority can also mean ultimate responsibility for care of a husband’s children. Examples were given both in Mambasa and in two locations in Djugu of first wives taking in children from other wives.

> My brother got a girl pregnant in the town and the family obliged him to pay dowry. He had three more children with this wife but a little while after she died. Three of the children are now looked after by the first wife, and are at school and everything without a problem. The last child, of 9 months, is cared for by my mother. (FGD, Mambasa, 12.07.16)

In summary while the first wife in a marriage has de-facto senior rank this can come with added burden (responsibility for care of children). As well as this, the potential displacement and insecurity that a first wife will experience following the arrival of secondwife into the foyer is considerable. Importantly, there are resources that other wives come with or deploy within the marriage. That is to say, while seniority is assured, influence can come from other sources. These resources can include age (youth), age and sex of children and support of wider family/kin. All must be seen within the wider context which is the efforts of women to attain well being, as ‘wife’ and within the parameters of the conjugal contract.

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**KABEER CONCEPTUALISES WELL BEING AS SURVIVAL, SECURITY AND AUTONOMY**

### 2.2.3 WELL BEING

This third section builds of prior sections on dimensions of conjugal contract and co-wife relations to discuss women’s accounts in relation to Kabeer’s concept of social well being. Kabeer conceptualises well being as survival, security and autonomy, where autonomy means that 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 accounts have shown, some women are able to navigate house-holding and relations within plural wife arrangements with more ease at given times, but there are challenges that all face in relation to the unequal terms of the marriage contract, as well as broader societal norms and institutions.

A number of the women interviewed had reached a mature age. There were two women in particular whose accounts, while not without struggle, were redolent of a relative security and autonomy. Sara, 57 (second wife) whose husband had taken a third wife and more or less withdrawn from the marriage, talked of the supportive relationship she enjoys with the neighbouring first wife with whom she has shared the foyer for over 20 years. She also accesses land via the Chief (not her husband) and while she is rearing his grandchildren (she describes them as the children of her husband’s children), her husband pays for their upkeep. A second case is that of Kavira, 58 (first wife), whose husband married her younger sister as a second wife around the time of her hysterectomy (Kavira who had one son with her husband, tried to resist this marriage to her younger sister). While her younger sister went on to bear 11 children, Kavira focused on business, amassing considerable assets by way of her flour business. Age is not always a shield from vulnerability but both of these women remain with the de-facto status of wife, whilst not being dependent on husbands for land or income. Their accounts testify to the ways in which women’s relative well being (security, survival & autonomy) can strengthen over time (as dependent children grow up) and can be engendered through a degree of economic autonomy also.
Other women who were able to navigate the relations and house-holding aspects with more ease were those women who came into the foyer with (among other things) some financial autonomy or support from wider family. Examples are Angelique, 36 (second wife) with a bread business and her own house, Maisha, 32 (third wife) with land provided by her father, Atosha, 30 (first wife) with the support from her family. What these resources have meant is that the women are within the foyer but not totally dependent on their husband or the benevolence of his family.

On the other side of the spectrum were women who expressed acute awareness of the insecurity of their position and experiences of a system that undervalues women’s role and contributions more generally. Kate, 38 (first wife) and Ana, 55 (first wife) are two women for example who were left with no material assets after many years of marriage. In Kate’s case, her husband’s family locked all 3 wives out of the estate after he was murdered by his second wife. In Ana’s case, her husband married a third wife and drove Ana out of the foyer by shaming and humiliating her.

In terms of property ownership, there were no instances of women holding title deeds to land. As well as this a number of women were not aware if the house where they lived was in their name, or if it was their husband’s intention to take steps to secure the asset in the event of his death. A number of other women were aware that the ‘parcelle’ (house plot) was in their name and were aware of the value of this. Nathalie, 32 (third wife) talks of how she is content in her third marriage in a way that she wasn’t in previous marriages and partly because of the steps her husband has taken to secure the future of his family:

I don’t have too much of a problem when I consider my other marriages… In my first marriage we constructed two houses in straw but I left with empty hands. With this present husband he has bought me a plot where is going to build me a house. My first husband never said that the house would be mine but here he has bought me my own. My rivals too, there where they live, have their own plot...if he dies, I know that this plot will never be takenaway from me and this is guaranteed because I have a document that the state also knows this and that they know I cultivate the field.

What is clear from the accounts is that women face uncertain futures as a result of a legally ambiguous status and families which, in spite of customary recognition of wives, are liable to disabuse the entitlements due to wives, particularly second or third wives. Building on prior sections, it is reasonable to conclude that the presence of other wives will compound the actual and potential insecurities that women face in relation to these factors.

Overall relational dynamics within polygamous foyers accentuate women’s awareness of the need to secure a level of economic autonomy, leaving those without such means such as Naomi, 29 (third wife) feeling very vulnerable.

"Whether you are first or fourth wife, have your own income. That is what I counsel other women. You cannot know what will happen to you upon the death of your husband so please initiate little activities to ensure your financial autonomy."

Women within these foyers, it seems, work on two fronts at the same time. They work on sustaining conjugal relations by way of husband’s presence (the umbrella of ‘wife’) whilst establishing (and strengthening) a degree of economic autonomy (sources of income, land and property).

While some wives will navigate situations with more ease than others (on the basis of available resources) ultimately all are navigating gender-based forms of difference and inequality that are built into the marriage contract and concealed as the ‘natural order’. The ‘empowerment’ of women in these contexts implies enhancing their capacity to recognise the order as unequal and to analyse and, where they can, act upon given situations as subordination. It also implies working with men and broader social institutions to transform the unequal structures which these women navigate daily.

41. The distribution of assets is customarily left to the brothers of a woman’s husband. While a wife is entitled (by custom) to retain access to land and property this is not always the case. If a widow is young for example, the husband’s family can judge her a liability i.e. she will stay on the land and bring in a man from another family.
3. Conclusions and Recommendations

3.1 Conclusions

Section 2.1 presented a framework for understanding how polygamous marriages form in localities in Mambasa and Djugu, Eastern DRC. The framework was developed on the basis of primary data and secondary sources and included aspects relating to the general legal and cultural context, marriage norms and polygamous marriage more specifically. Section 2.2 presented findings from the 18 in-depth interviews conducted with women living in polygamous unions in localities in Mambasa and Djugu, and discussed women’s experiences of ‘presence and house-holding’; ‘co-wife relations’ and ‘well-being’.

Overall, data about the practice and experiences of polygamy in the localities and gathered through key informant interviews, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews was readily available. The wide availability of data signals that polygamy is common with respondents reporting that an average of 1 in 3 marriages is polygamous.

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At the same time, lack of recognition of polygamy in DRC statutory law, combined with the position of established Churches like the Catholic Church, can lead to second and subsequent wives being considered by the community as unofficial or informal. What this means is that even where wives do enjoy a conjugal contract with a husband, they may be viewed by other members of the community, as well as NGOs, as not constituting part of a ‘foyer’. This factor can cause acute problems for women in the event of a husband’s death since they may be denied access to assets including land and house. Such acts denigrate the contributions that a woman has made to the family, and place her in extreme economic and social disadvantage. While interviewees did not directly raise this particular vulnerability (perhaps because all their spouses were living) it was signalled in the importance they place in ongoing presence of husband and access to land. In addition, the issue of ‘inheritance denied’ was raised as a major issue for wives in monogamous as well as polygamous marriages and by women who participated in key informant interviews and focus group discussions.

The main conclusions that can be drawn from research findings are as follows:

The conjugal contract & underlying power relations

The basis for a marriage has implications for a woman’s experience within the marriage, including the level of security and autonomy she enjoys. If the basis for marriage is a pregnancy for example, it can be difficult for the woman in question to find her footing as second or third wife. This kind of basis can enable a weaker contract between herself and her husband and, overall, makes it easier for him to relinquish responsibility for supporting the women and children in his life.

It seems rare for a man to inform existing wife/s before entering into a new marriage. This constitutes a clear example of the ways in which men are able to exert more power within marriage, and are subject to fewer obligations. Critically, when a husband enters into a second or subsequent marriage it has clear implications for his existing wife/wives, in particular with regard to his presence and the resources available within the foyer. In some cases, wives are required to take on care of children born to other wives.

The terms underpinning a marriage can shift with time. For example, a husband may no longer be living with a wife but maintains the conjugal contract by way of occasional visits and contributions (financial or otherwise); some married women exercise and enjoy more autonomy with age (older age); a man and wife may live separate lives for years but this doesn’t
necessarily constitute a break in the conjugal contract, since one may return to the other at any time and be received as spouse. For a number of women interviewed, the marriage they spoke about was not their first. Several had been married once before or even twice attesting to the fact that while shifts occur within contracts, marriages also end.

**Organisation of polygamous foyers and co-wife relations**

The majority of polygamous foyers in these localities appear to be segmented (wives living in separate dwellings). However, in some instances husband, wives and children will live in the same dwelling, or share a compound. What this means is that women appearing to live without a husband cannot be assumed to be single. Likewise it cannot be assumed that women in polygamous marriages are living with co-wives.

Irrespective of the arrangement, relations between co-wives exist and are significant. They can range from cordial to acrimonious, depending on a number of factors, including the extent to which the woman herself feels secure within the marriage as well as the extent to which a husband is perceived to be treating each wife equitably and actively fostering good relations between them. Lastly, while co-wives are undoubtedly bound up with each other, the extent to which co-wives, or even husbands, identify others as ‘family’ is not uniform.

**Access to resources within polygamous foyers**

Whether segmented or non-segmented, polygamy has a structuring effect on productive activity and allocations within and across households. In the main there is a felt separation between wives when it comes to householding, likely linked to the fact that processes of production are often separate. At the same time, productive activity and allocations within one ‘household’ will happen in the knowledge of other household(s) so while co-wives may not be competing directly they must continually negotiate allocations with their husband, from a subordinate position and through their relative bargaining power.

It is difficult to judge the extent to which allocations (from husband) are equitable; however, women reported that the provisioning is not sufficient. While men provide financial resources to the household(s) in different ways, it does not seem common for them to reveal their incomes to their wives. In a plural wife setting this can have the additional effect of charging. The knowledge of other wives and their competing demands on a husband’s time and resources fuels awareness among the women of the need to secure their own sources of income. These arrangements are also subject to change. Husbands can withdraw presence and supports; wives previously living separately can come together under one roof; a wife or wives that were previously living apart from their husband can return.

Overall, experiences of polygamy are shaped by complex interactions between social institutions, age, gender and other social and economic differences. Bases for marriage, age, socio-cultural norms (e.g. cultural norms which privilege women who have children and particularly boy children), access to control over land or assets, support from family and kin are all factors which determine the level of security and autonomy that a woman will enjoy within a polygamous marriage. Added to this, the importance of marriage for security and social standing (for women) reduces women’s power to withstand entry into an unfavourable marriage and/or to challenge inequitable treatment within it.

**3.2 Recommendations for DRC Integrated Programme**

The subject sensitive approach employed in this research, and the invitation to explore polygamy as practiced and understood in the localities within Mambasa and Djugu, has unveiled data that has value for Trócaire’s integrated programming in DRC.

The following are suggested recommendations requiring further considerations and reflection with a view to strengthening programming approaches and strategies.
1. Invest in robust gender, power and vulnerability analysis

The ways in which wives in polygamous marriages navigate and experience patriarchy must be carefully analysed and understood to identify potential vulnerability. A strong gender and power analysis will prevent un-interrogated assumptions and exemplify the complex ways in which vulnerability is generated within polygamous marriage and how this vulnerability is linked to social relations within the foyer and to broader family and community processes (e.g. wider family support [or not], inheritance), as well as factors that could contribute to the empowerment of women in such contexts.

As a piece of gender analysis, this report constitutes a starting point. The report constitutes an opportunity to showcase the value of gender analysis which can support programmers to avoid assumptions about men and women’s lives, and consider the ways in which women in these foyers and in the wider social context, acquire, use and lose power.

2. Community & household mapping as an integral part of programming

Wives in segmented foyers tended to describe house-holding as if they were singular wives. This is likely a result of their engagement with separate processes of production (separate fields, separate yards, separate kitchens and so on). However even where an arrangement is segmented, programme planning and design should give due consideration to the ongoing and continued negotiation that a woman will be engaging in with regard to allocation of resources (most typically determined by their husband). As well as this, physical separation in no way reduces the level of insecurity that wives potentially face or the competition for resources that exists between them.

With these factors in mind, DRC programme staff should consider community and household mapping as an integral part of their programming work, with the consent and awareness of programme participants and to ensure that every effort is made to mitigate potential conflict or harm. Without this kind of mapping, programme activities may unwittingly intensify competition between households; and/or may fail to recognise that a given situation within a foyer may affect a woman’s desire and ability to join programme activities.

This mapping should inform programme targeting as well as programme design.

3. Consider appropriate strategies to identify & engage with households and with ‘heads of household’

In DRC, a husband is de jure head of household (in law). A woman can be classed as de-facto head of household if, for example, she has been widowed or is divorced. In reality, household headship is more complex than this. Programme teams should consider (i) how best to work with this variance in household structure, and (ii) how to elicit pertinent information regarding actual house-holding, while respecting the privacy of individuals concerned. Questions to consider include:

• In the cases of women in polygamous foyers whose husbands have withdrawn considerably or who are present on an inconsistent basis, is this woman a de facto head of household?
• Will she identify as such if asked? In her the everyday roles and responsibilities does she effectively fill the head of household function?
• What does this mean for programme engagement with her?

It should be noted that these insights are not so easily gleaned through the format of structured meetings or questionnaires. This requires well-crafted and appropriately delivered household surveys, regular and well facilitated meetings and interactions with community and particularly women and by using sensitive and informed qualitative research methods as part of routine planning and monitoring.
4. Ensure that economic empowerment programmes promote equitable power & gender relations

With segmented foyers, men’s presence is distributed across a number of households. This can provide them with scope to neglect their obligations to wives and children. It can also mean that a woman’s responsibility for provisioning is augmented since her husband is apparently providing for a number of wives, or does not support them consistently.

With this in mind, economic empowerment programmes must go beyond providing women with additional resources since this risks de-responsibilising of husbands. 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.

Moreover, programmes that support women’s livelihoods should not be conceived as the means to addressing family poverty; such assumptions ignore the interdependence and complexity of social relations within the foyer and beyond.

5. Engage men for gender transformation

The research findings illustrate some of the ways in which unequal power relations between husbands and wives, and women’s subordinate position within the family and community, limit women’s options and opportunities. Tackling these inequalities requires engagement not only with women but with men also and with the social institutions in which the unequal relations are embedded and reproduced. It is vital that gender norms as well as the sources of men’s power (and women’s disempowerment) in these contexts are well understood and that this understanding is used as the basis to design and implement programmes. Furthermore, while programming should continue to support the empowerment of women, equal effort should be made to ensure that men take appropriate responsibility for supporting their families and that positive, diverse masculinities are promoted in public life, in the community, and in the family.

6. Embed strategies that support women’s power & autonomy

The research findings suggest a correlation between the autonomy that a woman is able to exercise within marriage and assets (for example her own business, or access to land independent of her husband). In addition the findings suggest that where a woman has support from wider family networks she will be more able to extract herself – if only temporarily - from situations of violence. While these aspects were not an explicit focus of the research, the findings suggest that further work could be done to identify the factors that protect and enable women’s autonomy (that is, her ability to shape choices and life changes, at both the personal and collective level), and to embed strategies that support these factors throughout programming.
Bibliography


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The standard logo for use abroad

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2. The title
3. The subtitle

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