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How Prevalent Are Polygamous Relationships in the Modern World?

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What is polygamy, and how prevalent are these marital practices around the world? Let's consider the facts about polygamous relationships in various societies and cultures. How common are polygamous relationships around the world?

What Is Polygamy and What Are Polygamous Relationships?

The notion of *polygamy* refers to *polygamous relationships*, the practice of having more than one spouse at the same time, simultaneously. In other words, these are non-monogamous marital relationships. In cases of polygamous relationships, it can be *polygyny*, when a man has several wives, or *polyandry*, when a woman has several husbands.

How Societies View Polygamous Relationships around the World

Although *polygamy* has been practiced in many cultures and religions throughout history, currently *polygamy* is illegal in numerous countries.

Many countries have prohibited polygamous relationships over the past couple of centuries.

In numerous regions worldwide, polygamy is prohibited. The United Nations Human Rights Committee has declared that “polygamy violates the dignity of women” and [has called for its “definite abolition in all regions where it persists.”](#)

For instance, in the U.S., it was illegal to engage in spouse-like relationships with more than one individual within the same household since 1882. However, every state has their own laws against getting married if individuals are already married to someone else. Polygamy is considered illegal in European countries, and the European Union does not permit multiple marriages. Many European countries, such as Switzerland, Germany, and Portugal, have laws that prohibit polygamy. A polygamous relationship is often considered a criminal offense. Some European countries indirectly support polygamy. For instance, the Netherlands and France have policies that recognize polygamous marriages in certain circumstances. The general prohibition of polygamy may have exceptions, for example, when a person married in a country where polygamy is legal and then immigrated to a European country. In such cases, the European country may recognize the legal status of these marriages.

In other regions of the world, such as swaths of the Middle East and Asia, societies consider polygamy legal. Many societies of West and Central Africa are known as the polygamy belt; the practices of polygamous marriages are frequently legal and widespread.

Polygamy is legal in many Muslim-majority and Hindu nations (Kramer, 2019). The study by the [Pew Research Center](#) found that Muslims and Hindus have larger households than Christians and non-

religious societies. Thus, regional norms and religions substantially influence the attitude and practice of polygamous marriages. Thus, some cultures continue to practice polygamy, often within specific social and religious contexts. The question remains: How common are the cases of polygamous marriages that occur? Let's consider how often.

Practice of Polygamy Is Rare Around the World

Public, political, and scholarly awareness of contemporary polygamous relationships has grown recently. Although polygamy is legal in many Muslim-majority and Hindu nations, these customs are rare in many of those countries (Kramer, 2019). The 2019 [report from the Pew Research Center](#) examined living arrangements in 130 countries and territories, focusing on the number of people living in polygamous and other types of households. These are some of the most significant findings from that report and another study of international laws and customs that a senior researcher at Pew Research Center, [Stephanie Kramer](#), presented ((Kramer, 2020).

1. People practice polygamous marriages only in [a few regions](#) of the world: [about 2% of the global population lives in polygamous households](#).
2. Polygamy is most often found in sub-Saharan Africa, where 11% of the population lives in arrangements that include more than one spouse.
3. Many of the countries that permit polygamy have Muslim majorities, and the practice is rare in many of them.
4. The Jewish Torah and Christian Old Testament refer to several instances of accepted plural marriages, including by Abraham, Jacob and David.

5. Religion often plays a role in how polygamy is governed and practiced within a single country.
6. Polygamy usually takes the form of polygyny – when a man marries multiple women.
7. One-in-five U.S. adults believe that polygamy is morally acceptable, a recent Gallup poll found.

References

Kramer, S. (2019). [Religion and Living Arrangements Around the World](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/12/12/religion-and-living-arrangements-around-the-world/), at <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/12/12/religion-and-living-arrangements-around-the-world/> (accessed on 20 May, 2025)

Kramer, S. (2020). [Polygamy is rare around the world and mostly confined to a few regions](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/12/07/polygamy-is-rare-around-the-world-and-mostly-confined-to-a-few-regions/). Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/12/07/polygamy-is-rare-around-the-world-and-mostly-confined-to-a-few-regions/> (accessed on 20 May, 2025).

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