UNTIL LAW DO US PART:
AN EXPLORATIVE STUDY OF ATTITUDES
OF ITALIAN CHRISTIANS TO POLYGAMY

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ABSTRACT: *Polygamy – a type of marital arrangement whereby a person marries more than one partner – is one of the most divisive issues in Italy. However, the international literature is mostly silent concerning opinions about and experiences of polygamy. The present paper fills this gap by highlighting the narratives of 22 Christian, monogamous Italians aged between their late-20s and mid-50s. Results suggest that most participants believe there is a troubling correlation between polygamy and harm to women and children. 'Slippery-slope' objections were commonplace in all discussions. Many respondents asserted that the practice leads to the radical transformation of the notion of marriage and the family. Others felt that it increases the likelihood that unmarried men will resort to crime to obtain material and symbolic resources such as partners and status. These perspectives mirror those of society more generally. Future research should demonstrate whether a balance can be struck between the measures required by Italian law to protect spouses from violence, reduce inequality, and defend the right to marry. However, scholars must avoid playing into the established narrative that polygamy is inherently adversarial to the West.*

KEYWORDS: *Italy, polygamy, gender, migration*

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INTRODUCTION

Polygamy or multiple marriage is the custom of having spouse-like relationships with more than one individual under the same roof simultaneously. Virtually all polygamists are polygynous: one man, many wives. Polyandry (one woman, many husbands) has always been rare globally. In Italy, the constitution forbids married couples from having a second purported spouse and threatens perpetrators with fines, jail time, or both. However, in the same country, it is legal to cohabit with multiple persons and have sexual relationships with them. Muslims (as citizens or immigrants) are – in the collective imagination – the main proponents of multiple marriages because Islam allows a husband to have up to four wives at any time (Saint-Blancat–Schmidt di Friedberg 2005). Proponents of polygamy justify the practice by citing the Western commitment to protecting rights and liberties. In contrast, opponents reject it on the grounds that, unlike monogamy, it purportedly threatens democracy (Shah 2003). The paper first explores the evolution of marriage and family in Europe. It then examines the position of polygamy in Italy and examines the balance between law and democratic functioning. It concludes with a chapter on the narratives of 22 Italian Christians. This study invites Italians to identify fair terms of cooperation for a diverse citizenry and offers a valuable set of tools for achieving that end.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Objectives

The manuscript is influenced by the idea that kinship – the way we are connected via marriage and descent – is a significant phenomenon around which society is constructed, resisted, and regulated (Folgerø 2008). Many of the publications on polygamy in Italy are outdated (see Colaianni 2002; Di Cosimo 2005). With a few notable exceptions, what does exist tends to be descriptive rather than analytical and does not explore personal stories. This work attempts to fill this gap in the literature by documenting how people's characterisations (e.g., perceptions of the approximate and root causes) of polygamy are liable to guide how they think about its place in the West and whether their country can regulate it.

Design

The author chose the interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) for data collection, analysis, and sharing (Brocki–Wearden 2015). This framework highlights the central role of the interviewer in discerning interviewees' experiences (Potter 1996). Smith states that "[a]ccess is dependent on, and complicated by, the researcher's conceptions required to make sense of that other personal world through interpretative activity" (Smith 1996: 264). Husserl (1999) writes that we can reflect upon any physical, emotional, or psychological circumstance. Despite this, there is a profound distinction between going through an event and the ability to think about what occurred. For Chan and Farmer (2017), semi-structured interviews are the best means of collecting data because IPA addresses meaning-making and sense-making. Nonetheless, focus groups can also be helpful (Smith et al. 2009). If investigators are transparent about their biases – the taken-for-granted world of everyday life – they may entice their interlocutors into sharing knowledge and, perhaps, overcome their platitudes (Bleakley 1999). In IPA, one question could be "What do Italian Christians think about polygamy?" In analyzing the answers, scholars must be conscious that not everybody derives meaning at all times from such discussions. Even when they can, they may not be able to formulate their ideas coherently (Pringle et al. 2011). They must also be aware of evolving issues associated with multiple marriages, from the loci of oppression and disenfranchisement to the language used in debates. IPA is an advantageous technique, but it also has some structural drawbacks. It is difficult to imagine the inner life of an individual and even more challenging to get real insights into someone's mind. When we think about how an individual will react during a sociological encounter, we often consider what we would have done in their situation. Of course, the same applies to those who listen to us when they try to foresee our reactions to their replies (Smith–Osborn 2008). In data-sharing management, IPA may entail having the interviewees give recommendations on how to anonymise personal information, distill and present pathos-laden accounts to the public, and so forth. In a similar vein, they may contribute to the choice of the publication outlet(s).

Theoretical framework

The polygenic-only character of Muslim and Mormon marriages is incompatible with the Italian constitution and core human rights instruments like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (Cotton 2020). The prohibition is justified because the

government can distinguish beliefs and thoughts (to which it grants absolute autonomy) from practice (concerning which it allows limited leeway). The presence of women who like or are part of multiple marriages does not make them less hideous in the courts' eyes. The reason is that the latter associate equality with dignity while linking inequality to harm (to oneself and others). It is also noteworthy that Italians do not have a customary legal system that permits religious or ethnic groups to govern themselves regarding family and succession matters. In some Afro-Asian polities, one can refer to tribal pronouncements (Hartley 1969), but this is impossible in Italy, where the power of the government is hegemonic and far-reaching and does not tolerate interference.

Gunsalus (2004) calls the 'nanny state' a polity that has quasi-fatherly relations with citizens, often intruding on their privacy and dictating how they should conduct their lives – just as relatives may do with children. This interference, known as government paternalism, is justified by the idea that ordinary people cannot consistently achieve the ends they set for themselves nor impartially judge their own cases. Concerning foreigners and their descendants, a system like the Italian one welcomes those who, despite having an inchoate if any existence at all within the body politic, share the same ideas of citizenry and opposes those who, despite their desire to belong, are deemed suspicious due to the 'oddity' of their bearing (Ambrosini 2013). Inasmuch as the Italian nation, like many others in the West, is often defined through Us *vs.* Them lines, naturalization procedures assess not only the *bona fide* intentions of applicants, language competence, and economic independence (so as not to burden social security services) but also their strong emancipation from their religions and cultures of origin (Bonjour 2020). In this respect, human rights activists have doubts about whether Italy is capable of or willing to go beyond exclusionary policies. Of concern is the strategic adoption of civic integration strategies for educating immigrants about the supremacy of the West (their acceptance thereof is one criterion of their incorporation into the *demos*) (Joppke 2007; Duerr 2017).

Setting and recruitment procedure

The author conducted the research between October 2020 and September 2021, adopting a purposive sampling method to identify subjects who were interested in the phenomenon being investigated (Andrade 2021). He wrote on online forums dealing with multiculturalism and integration and started a Facebook page to inform potential project candidates. To further expand the cohort, the author used the snowball sampling method (Biernacki–Waldorf 1981).

He asked the interviewees to recommend friends, siblings, and colleagues as potential candidates, who suggested others. The inclusion criteria were: (1) Italian citizenship; (2) adult age; (3) being interested in or having knowledge of polygamous households either in Italy or abroad: and, (4) being Christian. The author informed everybody about the study's goals and previous qualitative investigations that he had undertaken. The candidates for this project came predominantly from two Italian regions: the north-western area (Piedmont) and the north-central area (Emilia Romagna). They were of various ages (between their late-20s and mid-50s) and walks of life: five were lawyers, three were high-school teachers, two were university lecturers, six were students with part-time occupations in the gig economy, and six were laborers. Unsurprisingly, all the respondents declared themselves monogamous. The author followed the standard procedures for consent as set out by the Research Ethics Committee of Mae Fah Luang University, Thailand.

Data collection tools

The author conducted semi-structured interviews on Skype in Italian, ranging in length from 60 minutes to 1.5 hours, videotaped. The qualitative nature of data collection enabled the respondents to share their opinions without fear of being judged. The author kept all the questions open, giving cues to facilitate discussion with minimal interference. He listed carefully, negotiated meanings when they seemed ambiguous, and tried to be aware of nonverbal communication. Inspired by Bohart et al. (2019), a pilot test was undertaken with two volunteers to understand whether the wording of the questions was precise. Since both were unfamiliar with terms like polygyny and polyandry, he added concise explanations to the interview text. Research questions focused on two principal areas: (1) intimate perspectives and arguments for/against polygamy; (2) public views of polygamy. Notably, rules regarding selective disclosure – what and how much a person shares to influence an audience – and underlying rationales were disclosed and examined. The author organised warm-up sessions at the beginning of each meeting to reduce emotional stress and facilitate data flow. Written informed consent for the video recording was asked for and received before commencing the interviews.

Data analysis

First, the author transcribed the interviews *verbatim* and read the texts several times. Moreover, he translated the audio records from Italian into English. In doing this he avoided using the literal translation of local idioms, either adopting a synonymous phrase or providing a detailed description of the meaning(s) of phrases in their context. The next stage involved him adopting interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to delineate sense- and meaning-making processes. Hence, the author used line-by-line coding to search for thematic commonalities and odd cases. Next, he selected extracts from the discussions whose meanings would have been lost if paraphrased or summarised. Finally, he merged all the information into categories. In the end, six salient motifs emerged from the interviews:

(1) Polygamy is criminalized in Italy, where laws define marriage as monogamous and heterosexual.
(2) Ideas about polygamy have encroached into the Italian public arena over recent years via debates about people from the Middle East and Africa.
(3) Polygamy demands a review of current laws and consideration of the legislative loopholes which permit married men to have multiple wives by attending religious, non-registered ceremonies either in Italy or abroad.
(4) Polygamy is accused of resulting or being likely to result in suffering to spouses and children.
(5) Polygamy is a proxy for
    (a) non-Western aliens and their descendants, and
    (b) affiliation/membership in Islam and Mormonism.
(6) As Brumbaugh et al. (2008) remarked, knowledge of cohabitation may encourage open-mindedness and tolerance of diversity.

To sum up, polygamy as it exists today is not welcome in Italy. More spouses mean more unpredictability, which translates into a heightened likelihood of conflict during and after marriage. For example, co-wives or co-husbands have unequal status in terms of the amount and type of domestic labour they engage in, marital intimacy and privileges, and so forth. Among the interviewees, there was a prevailing tendency to refer to multiple marriages as an (ethnocultural) lens through which one can see the Other-in-itself. This portrayal is one of the most substantial reasons why the standard of debate at the national level has been characteristically poor.

RESULTS

In Italy, marriage is of a monogamous nature and is regulated by the state. A plausible justification for the requirement to be married to only one person at a time is maintaining equality and good morals. Polygamy is *de jure* and *de facto* banned but has attracted attention recently due to debates about immigration from non-Western countries. As per *Art. 556 of the Penal Code,* bigamy – the legal act of finalizing a marriage ceremony while already married – carries a sentence of 1–5 years, either if the married person starts a new marriage (*proper* bigamy) or if the unmarried subject 'ties the knot' with a spouse (*improper* bigamy). It is hard to quantify how many polygamous families exist in Italy, but there is a widespread tendency to associate these households with a foreign background and link them to Islam. However, disparities between the sexes do not necessarily come from religion (Engineer 2008; Alexander–Welzel 2011). Islam empowered women in the Arabian Peninsula in a way that could never have been imagined before the time of the Prophet Muhammed (Hidayatullah 2009). In this study, six interviewees with progressive ideas stressed that polygamy should be tolerated since it involves an exercise of religious freedom. Five respondents called for its decriminalization, feeling that it should warrant fines or community service, not jail sentences. In short, they asserted that the current prohibitions create shadow communities in which the vulnerable are easy prey to abusers due to fear of imprisonment, expulsion, and shame. Nine interlocutors with conservative perspectives argued against polygamy, feeling that it is inherently unequal. They also suggested that even if liberty is essential in a democracy, the state should restrict it – to the minimum extent possible – when the 'common good' is in danger. Moreover, one woman contended that the law tends to reflect the moral aspirations of those it governs. Rights do not exist in a vacuum. The privileges that citizens have generate obligations and duties towards society. For them, polygamy is a *malum in se* (evil in itself) offense that causes an entire downstream suite of negative consequences. Abuse may come at the hands of a husband, and siblings and wives may also ill-treat each other. Furthermore, as a zero-sum game, multiple marriages produce a permanent sub-class of unmarried citizens and hence raise the spectre of instability.

Limitations

The qualitative nature of this enquiry has a few drawbacks worth reckoning with. Generally speaking, the semi-structured interviews offered the participants a chance to elaborate on ideas and share thoughts. Nonetheless,

the author had power over the respondents regarding data collection, analysis, and presentation. His nationality, ideological standpoint(s), and professional status could have significantly affected how he interpreted their narratives. Since polygamy in Italy is punishable by imprisonment, the respondents could have withheld information or lied about themselves and their peers. The author learned about multiple marriages via a 'selective' sample – subjects actively seeking to share knowledge. Consequently, the voices of those who abstained from the meetings were left unheard. Virtual interviewing guaranteed the author access to individuals from different geographical areas, yet it reduced non-verbal cues and flattened interviewer–interviewee interaction. In parallel, the former required planning and a minimum of technical expertise to ensure that the appropriate software, hardware, and broadband connections were in place.

Contribution to theory

Although polygamy continues to be a 'bogeyman' in the Italian discourse on marriage and family, people may tolerate it if it becomes more egalitarian. The custom under such conditions would be very different from how it is generally perceived; civil law must regulate and characterise it in neutral terms (March 2011). However, courts in Italy may not support it even when it is framed based upon equality arguments since the state relies on the claim that the criminalization of multiple marriages wards off legal-administrative problems. Sadly, this posture deprives victims of marital violence of a voice and thus limits the redress of wrongdoings.

For multiple marriages to be normalized, they should follow commercial partnership law instead of family law. One party (of adult age and sound mind) could ask another (of any gender and with the same mental and psychological traits) to join a plural marital association in good faith. To ensure appropriate baseline conduct, the partners could specify precedents and subsequent conditions such as the number of future partners, anti-conversion policies, etc., and the type of penalty (material or symbolic) to be submitted to in the case of a breach (voluntary or involuntary). There could also be a withdrawal clause – divorce – stating that the agreement will end when one member of the marriage decides to become monogamous. Obligations between those involved would be reciprocal and nobody else could claim any right over them or the contract unless the signatories permit it. In some extreme circumstances, pre-existing official members of a marriage may vote for or seek the judicial expulsion of an intimate (Davis 2010). From a bargaining perspective, this *modus operandi* can be a strategic step toward

recognising non-normative households. Crucially, it would lessen the chances for opportunistic and exploitative action. Religious polygamy generates gender hierarchies *ex-post* (women or men lose bargaining power when there is a new co-spouse), but its contractual version ensures equality.

The Italian constitution has different rules for marriage and parenting. Accepting polygamy does not mean approving multiple parenthood (Davis 2010). Nevertheless, extended communities of intimates in which grandparents or nannies take care of children together with (or instead of) their biological relatives (who, by the way, do not have to be married) are not some new-fangled invention. There is good reason to hold that abuse is more the consequence of regulatory failure than something inherent to polygamy. Similarly, it is wrong to presume that monogamy is fundamentally sound because opportunism and injury also appear in dyadic arrangements. Italian law does not permit multiple legal parenthood; therefore, the state would also intervene to eliminate disparities in subsidies and resources among the children of polygamists. There is a more instructive lesson that may be learned. Comparing same-sex unions with multiple marriages is somehow erroneous because LGBTQ+ folks stretch (they are not heterosexual) but do not go beyond (they are monogamous) the limits of how both religious and secular Italians conceptualize romantic love.

DISCUSSION

Polygamy means marriage with more than one spouse at a time. It can be divided into polygyny (one husband with multiple wives) and polyandry (one wife with multiple husbands). The former is the most widespread version, including situations whereby someone can be officially monogamous but informally polygamous (Fenske 2015). The term polyamory ('many loves') refers to the practice, desire, or simple acceptance of the idea that one can love more than one person at a time, with the explicit consent of all current and potential partners. People unable or unwilling to be monogamous often describe polyamory as their sexual orientation. Although polygamy in the West is commonly related to Islam and Mormonism and the principal branch of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), it exists in other cultures and faiths (Lawson et al. 2015). Serial monogamy, or when an individual engages in monogamous pairing through divorce and remarriage, is legal and, although not considered desirable (Kolk–Andersson 2020), is becoming more common as the Western world embraces secularization. Technically, the serial monogamist does not cheat or commit adultery (extramarital sex).

Western thinkers have favoured monogamy over polygamy (MacDonald 1990; 1995). However, efforts to track the origins of the former run afoul of the wide range of quasi-marital and cognate structures that have developed and disappeared throughout history (Scheidel 2012). In ancient Greece, monogamy was praised as the root of social stability. The basic idea was that reproductive egalitarianism benefits everyone. Nevertheless, male Greeks fornicated with (male and female) slaves and prostitutes. In ancient Rome, the situation was quite similar. Monogamy was the marital norm, but promiscuity was widespread. Children born to unmarried relatives were neither concealed nor rejected by their families. They had the right to inheritance, to work for the army, and occupy influential positions in the government. Monogamy became dominant in continental Europe in the Middle Ages due to the Catholic Church's fight against adultery and fornication (sexual intercourse between unmarried people) (Scheidel 2012). Christian action culminated with two significant Councils establishing rules that are still valid today: the fourth Lateran Council in 1215 and the Council of Trent in 1563. A brief but radical upswing in polygamy in the Anabaptist kingdom of Münster (1535–1536) was to be the custom's swan song (Brown 1951), although The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) revived it in the United States in 1831 (Scheidel 2012).

Mormonism is a faction of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), started by Joseph Smith in the nineteenth century in the United States (Gordon 2003). Although in the beginning, Mormons accepted polygamy (otherwise known in their circles as plural marriage), they later disavowed it. In *Reynolds v. the United States* (1878), the US courts defined polygamy as a cruel custom equitable to slavery. The national congress passed the *Edmunds–Tucker Act* (1887), authorising the seizure of LDS Church property and making polygamy a federal offence punishable by lengthy jail sentences. Mormonism arrived in Italy during World War II, but it was only in 2012 that policymakers officially recognised it (Homer 2019).

According to the *Quran* – the central scripture of Islam – a Muslim man can have up to four contemporaneous wives provided he is physically capable and just to all of them. This rationale is encapsulated in the Surah An-Nisa and the available sources of Islamic jurisprudence (Ahmed 1986). Polygamy is envisioned by the faithful as an *extreme* remedy for a social ill, *in primis*, the existence of women who are orphaned or widowed. Notably, the habit is not obligatory or recommended (Rohman 2013). Several Muslim-majority countries like Turkey (1926) and Tunisia (1956) have outlawed it or imposed judicial restrictions. Islamic marriage seeks to encourage order; its primary objective, even more than reproduction (as in the case of Christianity), is the normalization of sexual behaviour (Khuri 1998). However, it tends to foster

unequal benefits among spouses (Salih 2007): the man exercises marital authority; the woman(en) instead enjoys material rights, including but not limited to the dowry. This disequilibrium is maximised in the institution of repudiation (Korteweg–Selby 2012) – the ability of a husband to unilaterally renounce marital ties (Rapoport 2005).

The tragic irony of Islam is that while the *Quran* cherishes harmony, conservative political parties, exegetes, and militant groups have moved against it. As a consequence, Westerners often associate Islam with misogyny. In this context, asserting one's Muslim faith can lead to violent responses (Skenderovic–Späti 2019). What is troubling is that this myopic reading does not do justice to the heterogeneity of voices – glossing over, for instance, the long legacy of female intellectuals who have openly condemned gender oppression and skewed interpretations of Quranic verses.

More than one million Muslims live in Italy, making Islam the second-largest religion (Ferrari 2018). They are citizens, refugees fleeing war-torn zones, travellers, and migrant workers. Not all of them are religiously observant. For those who are, one cannot determine their degree of group membership by how they dress or prey. Moreover, having an Islamic marriage is not necessarily correlated with piety (Pearce–Lewis 2019).

For the Roman Catholic Church, marriage is sacred, heterosexual, and monogamous; nevertheless, there are subtle divergences between clerical teachings and passages in the *Bible*. In the *Old Testament* (OT), *Matthew 19:4–5* praises monogamy (via the figure of one-fleshness), yet *Genesis 4:19*, *Exodus 21:10*, and *Deuteronomy 21:15–17* talk about polygamy among devotees to God in neutral terms. Early canon law similarly lacks an unequivocal condemnation. Only later, during the Middle Ages, did the Vatican start to portray multiple marriages as heretical, and help state courts discipline bigamists. Despite this, Smith III (2012) noted that the clergy excepted from liability widows who remarried under the guidance of a duly authorized priest (but some clerics felt that these unions were valid but not sacramental). They were the wives of soldiers, merchants, and travellers or the husbands of abducted or runaway women. Brown (1939) adds that, through time, the Roman Catholic Church has also agreed to annul the official bond of a couple for a just cause (e.g., an impediment to the reception of the sacrament) if requested by both spouses or only one against the will of the other (Cahil 1986). Since theology shapes canon law, dissolution (via declarations of nullity) is licit, but not divorce.

Those who wish to marry in Italy must certify that they are single, widowed, divorced, or have dissolved a previous marriage. The legal minimum age is 18 years, but 16 years old with parental, guardian, and judicial consent. In

addition, family law requires that the ceremony be conducted publicly and before witnesses (Ferrando 2017). Bigamy – the contracting of marriage by or with a person already bound to another – is an offence punished by imprisonment (Art. 556 of the Penal Code). In some cases, individuals may not be aware they are in a second marriage because their partners were not truthful regarding the past. When the spouse knows they are entering a wedding while the other party is still in a legally binding relationship, the state can charge both with bigamy. If the union previously contracted by the bigamist is declared null and void, or the second one is repealed (for reasons other than bigamy), the offence is extinguished, and if there has been a conviction, the prosecution and criminal effects cease (Tuccari 2017). A multiple marriage celebrated abroad cannot be legally transcribed in Italy because it is contrary to the *impedimentus legamis* described in *Art. 86 of the Civil Code*. When spouses contract one or more unions in countries where bigamy is not a crime, they still violate their responsibilities. Children born of a polygamous mother are equated with those born out of wedlock. However, following the reform introduced by Legislative Decree 28/12/2013 no. 154, the rights of natural (born out of wedlock) and legitimate (born during marriage) children have been equalised. Polygamists generally contract their second marriages outside Italy or far from localities/municipalities where they are known – in any case, far from where they acquired the first one(s). Italian jurisprudence accentuates the relevance of consent, although a ceremony performed abroad may not involve this, nor include the statutory declarations of the spouses but only comments made by witnesses.

Fifteen participants saw an irreconcilable conflict between multiple marriages and the Italian family – the standard comprising two biological/heterosexual parents and their children. All of them agreed that the practice exclusively takes the form of polygyny and is likely to lead to harmful consequences for women because of its patriarchal nature. Five argued that if women shared the equal opportunity of having more than one companion, the power asymmetry between genders would eventually be mitigated. That is to say, they had no qualms with what they called consensual egalitarian polygamy. Still, they disliked the misogynistic one-sided version, which involves – in their opinion – nothing more than a pseudo-harem. Brooks (2009) is sympathetic to this description. Four participants wanted to go even further, opening space inside multiple marriages for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ+) folks. Three suggested that coming out in Italy as a gender-diverse person to one's parents is more acceptable than confessing polygamous proclivities. Unlike sexual orientation, a preference for polygamy was not thought of as a trait one is born with.

I do not like what is happening to Italy. Most foreigners who come here want support from the government but refuse to adjust to our values. We welcome those ready to integrate, but we do not like troublemakers. There is no space for them here. [...] In Italy, a husband has only one wife. Those who wish more can take their luggage and leave. (Paolo, age 55)

We should stop being politically correct. Polygamy was, is, and always will be against Italian traditions. I have zero tolerance for polygamists. [...] We need to be more vocal about defending our culture. (Angela, age 40)

I realise that polygamy is practised outside Europe. Foreigners can do what they want in their home countries but not here. I grew up in a monogamous family, and I am proud. [...] Having one father and one mother is all that matters. (Marco, age 39)

The interlocutors told the author that the Italian government does not interfere with how and what people think but balances the material expression of views with collective needs. This rationale is consistent with the notion that responsibilities accompany rights and welfare (Deign 1988).

Monogamy is the nuptial norm among Italians. [...] I do not like polygamists, because they threaten our society. Nobody in my neighbourhood would ever say, 'I like them, or I want to be like them.' (Federico, age 45)

I understand that divorce-weary individuals can lose faith in the Catholic Church, but we cannot rethink monogamy. There are no valid alternatives. [...] polygamy from the outset is dangerous. A romantic relationship – not a sexual one – cannot be built on multiple partners. How do you treat your significant other with dignity? How can you equally distribute love? It is impossible. (Pietro, age 50)

Everything is changing so fast in Italy. Sadly, most things are moving in the wrong direction. I am against polygamy because of common sense. I cannot stand individuals and practices that are cruel and violent to women. [...] There are too many immigrants around us. [...] Their rules and regulations do not chime with ours. [...] It is difficult to be open-minded. (Elena, age 45)

For fifteen interviewees, polygamy is exceptionally troublesome. First, its existence would create two distinct classes of spouses in Italy: those legally united who enjoy rights and those who are not, with little or no protection (Rinaldo 2011). Second, the state would have to sustain an underclass of unmarried citizens likely to take more significant risks to increase the possibility of getting a companion. This situation becomes more complicated if we include non-nationals who temporarily stay with their families (e.g., tourists or officers of embassies/consulates). In theory, they too could be deterred from visiting or even arrested. Doing this, however, would compromise Italy's standing in the international arena.

In a strident passage, one respondent indicated how polygamists might get around the law by marrying abroad. However, this argument is unconvincing because for such ceremonies to be valid they need to be transcribed into the national registers, which can be done only when they abide by the same rules as apply to official ones (De Blasio–Vuri 2019). It is more probable that to skirt arrest, people would choose to have one registered spouse and other unrecognized partners. In other words, they may opt to perform rites without a state license. This approach is particularly likely if they come from countries where religious and customary laws coexist with those of the government.

> *Polygamy cannot be tolerated, not so much out of Christian moralism, but to ensure the respect and dignity of women. [...] Europe has fallen into the trap of multiculturalism. [...] Legalising polygamy fosters two parallel legal systems, one based on Italian civil law and the other on religious law. (Giorgia, age 37)*

> *I am sure many polygamists marry outside Italy and stay out of the public eye. [...] When confronted by somebody they do not trust, they may deny [it]. (Alessandro, age 39)*

The participants contended that police officers do not have enough time or will to go after every criminal, especially if the likely culprit is a poor immigrant from an urban slum where co-op housing is more common than owner occupation. They also noted that the ban on polygamy is a persistent but under-investigated feature of Italian immigration and family law. Unfortunately, the system pushes men to immigrate with a wife of their choosing, leaving everybody else behind. With this background, it can be claimed that Italian jurisprudence has a gendered impact.

Police officers maintain law and order in Italian cities. However, it is hard for them to ensure successful prosecutions against every lawbreaker. Nowhere can be one hundred percent safe. There will always be a minority of individuals who avoid punishment. We must also remember that Italy has quite a few no-go zones. (Marco, age 35)

Six interviewees asserted that the danger posited by multiple marriages is real (sexual imbalance can have grim consequences) but exaggerated by the media. Reading the pages of national newspapers, one receives the impression that polygamists hardly care about anything other than destroying Italy (Premazzi 2021). The former underscore how most citizens accept the right of consenting adults to have a private life of their choosing and agree that the state should not punish them if their deeds do not impinge on family and marriage. Among the imperatives they share are a desire to defend Christianity, retain good morals, and advance equality.

CONCLUSION

In Italy, polygamy is a topic that can make a person go off on a tangent. Most importantly, perhaps, it is outlawed and criminalized. This means that those who endorse it live on the margins of society and cannot get the benefits of lawful marriage. Most participants agreed with the *status quo* and maintained that the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church about the virtue of monogamy influence their perspective. Marriage, to the exclusion of all other themes, is a notorious theological trope. However, other interviewees (a minority) were more accommodating, seeking to make their country less hostile. They suggested that we try to learn more about our own and other cultures. Therewith, the emphasis on reforms should not be on equivalating different marital arrangements but on creating a level playing field. They also explained that for Italy to accept polygamy the latter must abandon what Strauss (2012) defines as a *hub-and-spokes* framework (one central spouse, usually a man, controlling many peripheral ones), replacing it with a series of dyadic agreements between independent parties. One last caveat in their narration is that multiple marriages *per se* are not detrimental, but patriarchy is. It is a fact that non-normative conjugal structures do not necessarily cause stigmatisation, violence, or the second-class status of one gender, certainly no more than numerous other present practices and commitments that individuals in the West judge as reasonable.

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