

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Subjective Preferences for Polygamy, Concubinages and Motherhood in Africa

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Abstract: Background: Some African women choose to engage in polygamy, while others prefer to be concubines to married men—despite monogamists’ general stance of not engaging in such relationships. This study also aims to identify the motivations behind these choices by examining the cultural norms that inform them. **Methods:** This is a phenomenological investigation of African women’s cultural practices, focusing on their roles in three cultural constructs: polygamy, concubinage, and motherhood—amid modern educational and multicultural influences. Using a qualitative literature review approach and content analysis of existing scholarship, the study examines whether such choices align with the Gender Preference Theory (GPT), while accounting for dissenting evaluations of GPT. **Results:** Becoming a mother is a cherished goal in African societies and for African women alike—a feat not restricted to whether a woman is married, or in a polygamous relationship or concubinage. Gender division of labor has long been part and parcel of traditional African societies, rendering the application of GPT redundant. Many working women in Africa are also mothers, as they view motherhood as both a natural obligation and fulfillment of their subjective needs. The desire to embrace motherhood and fulfill this natural obligation may lead some African women to opt for polygamous relationships when no suitable unmarried partner is available—a choice shaped by both religion and culture. For many young couples, the economic barriers to marriage are too burdensome, leading them to have children outside of formal marital unions. **Conclusion:** GPT appears to be grounded in the assumption that women possess autonomy—equated with economic power and social control—and can choose their own partners from a pool of suitors, whether in monogamous marriages, polygamous unions, or concubinage. Becoming a mother is shaped by biology, opportunity, and choice—regardless of cultural or religious imperatives.

Keywords: African communalistic lifestyle, sacrificial love, social justice, societal trust, cultural values, western individualistic lifestyle

1 Introduction

1.1 Tracing the origin of Gender Preference Theory

This is a phenomenological investigation of women in Africa and their preferences for polygamy, concubinages and motherhood, irrespective of being married or not, using the Gender Preference Theory as the basis of assessment against the Feminine Standpoint Theory, Intersectionality Theory and the Concept of Human Flourishing. The aim is not to delve into numerical assessment of the quantitative or differential economic relationships between the cohorts of women used in GPT (Leahy & Doughney, 2014). Rather, it focuses on the cultural practices of women in Sub-Saharan Africa with respect to their role in three cultural burdens, namely, polygamy, concubinages and motherhood, despite modern educational and multi-cultural influences from the West, Asiatic nations and other comparator zones of the world. The other goal is to identify similarities or dissimilarities between African women and Western women and why GPT is inherently hegemonic in flavor and inconsistent with sociological and feminist epistemology in the context of African women (Hakim, 2000; Bryson et al., 1999; Worcester et al., 1999). To tease out the dissimilarities between African women and Western women, the concept of autonomy, choice and subjective wellbeing would be explored to conduct how each side of the subjects of this study experiences these ethical and cultural values.

The Gender Preference Theory posits that women in modern affluent societies (which probably automatically excludes women in peripheral and semi-peripheral economic blocs)

share similar lived experiences under patriarchal norms due to their collective autonomy and choice-making abilities. In the Western societies, individual freedom is part of the mundane rights-based claims of women, to a considerable degree, which is unlike the autonomy that African women generally experience. Despite, the commonality of the rights-claims that Western women enjoy, it has led to their having different preferences in values, goals and other subjective priorities. These subjective values, goals and priorities, have conflated and stratified women into three distinct cohorts, consisting of a minority of women that are (a) work-centered, another section that is (b) home-centered, and the third section that remains (c) childless by choice.

The Gender Preference Theory, (GPT) adopted for this paper, was articulated by Catherine Hakim in 1999-2000, 2002. It is reasonable to assume that GPT was influenced by the American economist, Paul Samuelson's 1938 *Revealed Preference Theory*, (RPT), particularly when one considers the co-incidence between Samuelson's three "axioms" and the three distinct cohorts of women in Hakim's GPT. The following is a comparative analysis between GPT and RPT.

1.2 Revealed Preference Theory could have inspired GPT in Sociology?

Samuelson's work was based on economic research analysis, but Hakim's work was an attempt to explain the sociological impulses that inform women's choice-making abilities. Samuelson posited the Revealed Preference Theory of consumers based on their purchases, given constant income and prices in relation to other bundle of needs. He did not limit the application of RPT to only the "Core" nations but universalized the theory for all economic blocs (Roper & Zin, 2013; Samuelson, 1938). Samuelson's work was inspired by Jeremy Bentham's theory of Utility or the desired satisfaction based on subjectivity (Roper & Zin, 2013). Samuelson's intention was to deviate from the utilitarian concept due to the difficulty of measuring individualized satisfaction. The Revealed Preference Theory articulated three cohorts of consumers, consisting of the (i) Weak, (ii) Strong and (iii) Generalized axioms of revealed preferences. "Weak" meant that consumers would make the same choice for a particular good determined by price in comparison with other goods, unless another good provides more value or benefits such as being less expensive, better quality and convenience. The "Strong" axiom covers multiple choices in good selection and purchases, although if the choice is limited to only two items, then the weak and strong axioms appear to be equivalent. The "Generalized" axiom states that the choices in this zone could cover multiple goods provided income or purchasing power can satisfy such demands. This means that the generalized axiom can benefit from multiple goods and maximize their utilities. Many critical analyses have been produced against the Revealed Preference Theory (Harley, 1964; Afriat, 1967; Blaug, 1980).

1.3 Gender Preference Theory designed for Western Women, *only*?

This paper reviews Catherine Hakim's Gender Preference Theory, (GPT) articulated in her book *Lifestyle and Choices in the 21st Century*, (2000) in the context of employment and choices available to the majority of Western women within the last one hundred years. Perhaps, this paper might be forcing the hand of GPT; by using it to review opportunities available to African women. The author did not intend to apply GPT to African women, but rather to the study of Western women's subjective economic and social preferences (Hakim, 2000)? There have been other Hakim's prior writings on the same subject in 1999, 2000 and beyond. It appears the Gender Preference Theory or GPT is one of the most shining failures of the feminist movement of the world, whether it was intended to be applied to women of Sub-Saharan Africa as a theory or not. Although GPT may have been designed for the Western woman with no recognition to the fact that African women too have the collective expectations from feminism for direction and concepts that can be used to improve their lot, and, also, are engaged in various economic activities and industries which are worth studying, whether those economic activities are in the formal or informal employment space, those women too are expected to be inured with respect, dignity and a sense of self-worth embedded in GPT. Self-esteem arises also from the esteem of others, according to Fukuyama (2018). African women's expectation of respect and dignity cannot be detached from the same values of other women of the world, when a theory is proposed and then allowed other researchers to misapply it, or submit assertions against so-called patriarchal and male masculinity as the main blocks that undermine the wellbeing and social statuses of African women. For a theory or a concept to have universal application, it

ought to be inclusive and should not be limited to a small group of women on the planet. This is because, “theory gives people a set of terms with which to criticize abuses that otherwise might lurk nameless in the background” (Nussbaum, 1999, p. 229), although she also cautioned that “it may be problematic to use concepts that originate in one culture (such as GPT designed for Britain and the Netherlands), to describe and assess realities in another (Africa) – all the more problematic if the culture described has been colonized and oppressed by the describer’s culture” such as the colonial empire of Britain and the colonial outreach of territorial acquisitions by the Royal Dutch Navy. Inclusivity of a theory or a concept should be the guiding principle because when other researchers apply the theory or concept in a generalized manner, they do not often consider what the originator intended the theory or concept to be used for strictly speaking. Researchers doing work on sexual harassment and hostile work environment as well as gendered economic and industrial role assignments, have cited GPT as part of their explanatory thesis for their assertions and conclusions, with obvious example as Botha’s, (2017) *Barriers to career advancement of women in mining: A qualitative analysis*. Obviously, South Africa is not Britain or Netherlands, although nationals from these two nations are living and working in South Africa, many with greater levels of successes than even the indigenous South Africans, due in part to the colonial and apartheid suppression of the natives of South Africa. The vexatious aspects of Hakim’s admission, honest though it may be, that GPT was designed for Britain and the Netherlands contains the assumption that women in those places have achieved, perhaps, self-actualization and they have resolved or are resolving the conflict between paid jobs and major investment in family life.

Her assumption ignores the reality that, like most Western women everywhere, or even among Western women, their preferences in life are dictated by their subjective needs: - whether to engage in profit-seeking ventures, formal employment or invest in the family by way of motherhood, or stay-at-home mother, is not a novel idea. Even before De Beauvoir’s (1949) *Second Sex*, and after Betty Friedan came into the scene of feminist studies with the *Mystique* (1968), these choices have been available to women everywhere. These choices have been the status quo of humans, whether men or women, white or black, despite gender considerations, whether to work or not, whether to go into formal employment or not, whether to work part-time or not, as soon as a man or a woman decides to set her body in motion.

“For centuries various philosophers have said some demeaning things about work, which resonates with the current attitudes towards work. For example, Aristotle (384-322 BCE) felt work took man away from his most important pre-occupations: literature, philosophy, art, etc. In the same vein, modern society tend to think that work takes them away from the important things, such as gossip, watching television, texting, sending risqué images to their friends on social media and so on. Aristotle said the important pre-occupations of man were leisure and philosophy (Anthony, 1977). To Aristotle, work was a corrupt waste of time that would make a citizen’s pursuit of virtue more difficult. He made it clear that the purpose for which the majority of men labored was in order that the minority, the elite, might engage in pure exercise of the mind which included art, philosophy and politics (Tilgher, 1930, p. 5). Today in Africa, similar sentiments pervade social arrangements. There are many households, particularly in patrilineal societies, where the male child or person is not allowed to do any household chores” (Norman, 2023, pp. 25-26).

African women may not be considered as living in affluent modern societies, but living in such a society does not necessarily translate into enhanced choice making skills or incidence with respect to what a woman prefers to pursue and the lifestyle in which she indulges, within the framework of her capacity and agency. Even in affluent societies, there are social and economic controls about what each person can do because the exercise of autonomy and choice is not absolute and it is moderated by many internal and external factors: time, opportunity, cost, and proximity. If there was any doubt in anybody’s mind about the limitations and controls government and public health authorities can place on civil liberties in general, the Covid-19 lock-down of the world, cessation of international travel, mass gathering, university and school lectures or classes suspension, all these should be a constant reminder of the main balancing act required under the Hohfeldian incidents of rights: privilege, claim, power, and immunity (Hohfeld, 1919; In Norman & Norman, 2016, p. 345-360). It appears many researchers in the Western world or even African researchers who are devoted to counterparts in the Western world, do not understand the ethics and moral landscape of the developing world in many respects. The

statement by [Martha Nussbaum \(1999\)](#) that, to describe and assess realities in another nation in the developing world using Western ethical values presents “all the more problematic if the culture described has been colonized and oppressed by the describer’s culture”. Wasn’t the United States of America also colonized by the United Kingdom until the drafters of the U. S. Constitution, with diplomacy and force, managed to declare independence in 1776 with the support of patriots like Richard Henry Lee, John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, to mention but a few? Does it mean that English ethical values developed by English philosophers such as Francis Bacon (1561-1626); Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679); Adam Smith (1723-1790); John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) and Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), to mention but a few, should not be applied to the American experience? It has been noticed by this author that, when it comes to the generalities of life in Africa, including domains of life expectancy, happiness and wellbeing,

“The perception of the collective 54 strong Africa nations with relative strengths, irrespective of individual nation’s Gross Domestic Product, and other economic indicators, the general thinking is that, Africa suffers from either a chronic happiness deficit, or that, Africa is incapable of happiness over a long period of the life span of an individual. Some researchers attacked the general charitable impression that though Africans may be poor, they are happy. While they may be hesitant to make the same conclusion about Bhutan, for example, despite the correlation between Bhutan’s Gross Domestic Product, (GDP) and its Gross National Happiness Index, (GNH), they are quick to put each African nation down even in assessing a value as intrinsic to all human lives as happiness” ([Ura et al., 2012](#); In [Norman et al., 2024](#), p. 2-3).

It looks like similar stereotypical judgment about Africa’s possession of ethics is also being condemned much in the same way that the mere assertion by some benevolent and positivists researchers claim about Africa as being poor but happy. In the work of [Norman and Norman \(2016\) *Juxtaposition of Hohfeldian Rights, Principle-Based Ethics, Functionings, and the health-Seeking Behavior of Sub-Saharan Africa*, \(2016\)](#) the weighing of the rights of people in a given society requires a constant balancing act of the competing interests. In that paper, which dealt extensively with principle-based ethics of which in the Western world, autonomy and choice are parts of it, they contended that,

“Principle-based ethics appears to be recent addition to Sub-Saharan Africa’s rights profile, although universal principles of morality have been part of the region from time immemorial. In this regard, periodic review of how principle-based ethics is being integrated into the health-seeking behavior of Sub-Saharan Africa (or in feminism and masculinism) is essential to the capabilities and functionings of the people. Whether the Hohfeldian incidents should be applied to Sub-Saharan Africa in measuring the degree of autonomy, capacity and informed consent, given the limited actual [...] education in politics and diplomacy at the national level, is a vexing question” ([Norman & Norman, 2016](#), p. 345).

They argued in that paper further that, perhaps, concepts such as “responsibility”; “do no harm” and “paternalism” should be more promoted in Africa since it resonates with the practical realities of leadership role, the role of medical doctors; lecturers; parents and even spouses. But doing so, presents a problematic challenge to mainstreaming of their “functionings” and “being” (ibid, p. 345). Nonetheless, the Hohfeldian rights are a natural part of African ethics. It is fair to state that, perhaps, principle-based ethics does not incorporate African ethics per se, although authority figures such as chiefs, political leaders, physicians’, and decision experts apply paternalism over the population, where such an approach is inherently embedded in the situation at hand. The application of paternalism often leads to enhanced wellbeing of the beneficiary, that there is a dedicated professional taking care of the person, if such duty is exercised with responsibility and virtue. It enhances the health-seeking behavior and the contentment with life of the people of Africa, although paternalistic decision process and the outcome may interfere with the people’s “rights”, “claims”, “power” and “privilege”, as well as their capabilities and functionings. Hohfeldian rights relate to Sub-Sahara Africa as universal man and amalgamate with African ethics and morality through the paternalism of political and social leaders, medical doctors, community leaders and other “decision experts” in society in general (ibid, p. 345-346).

“In Hohfeld’s articulation of the rights and privileges of the individual, he did not

predicate his ethical matrix on rationality alone but also on nature. Human beings are social entities and as social entities, they share common destiny, rights and privileges, and therefore deserve common normative moral and ethical basis for the evaluation of their conduct. Hohfeld described the attributes of these rights and the circumstances under which they could be exercised, compromised, encroached upon, or even abused by higher, “decision experts”, as humans try to express them-selves in the pursuit of wellbeing and material progress (Hohfeld, 1919; Sen, 1979, 1995). For the expression of the will of man in the pursuit of his dreams and aspirations, in the pursuit of the things that are meaningful to him, man needs to do more than to observe the measurement of his ethical rights against those of his neighbors. He needs to have the ability to conduct an assessment of his conduct and to design the changes and initiate the actions that would bring him to his goals. For this part of the analyses, we turn to the Capability Approach for guidance (ibid, p. 359).

Again, African women may not be considered as living in affluent and modern societies, but living in such societies does not necessarily translate into enhanced possession of choice superior to those of African women with respect to what a woman prefers to pursue and the lifestyle she indulges in relative to her circumstances. While some women, irrespective of country origin may feel very secure, happy and fulfilled in Johannesburg, despite the rampant rapes, murder, and burglaries, others may feel very insecure in London’s affluent suburbs due to the fear of violent robberies, stabbing in the streets of London, or spontaneous race riot. In 2023, Tariq Tahir, writing for the National News quoted Ian Rowley as warning visitors to Central London, where Ian Rowley lives and serves as a local politician not to “wear a luxury watch. It will get snatched” I don’t know anyone who wears a luxury watch, because it will get snatched”. It was not only that Marylebone High Street ward on Westminster City Council area is a hot spot for crimes such as thefts, but that London’s police force is allegedly and according to Ian Rowley, doing so little to pursue crimes or stop them from happening in the first place. “The spate of thefts of luxury watches, often snatched by audacious gangs using mopeds to escape in broad daylight through its bustling streets, brought crime into sharp focus in the British capital”. Tahir added that London has “a rate of 50 crimes involving knives and other offensive weapons that resulted in a prison sentence or caution per 100,000 people” from data emanating from the Ministry of Justice (Tahir, 2023, para. 4-5; 20-28). The “protection against crime” probably affects subjective security in most nations more deeply than geopolitical security considerations. Notice that in security studies, “objective security” is defined as “being safe”, whereas “subjective security” means “feeling safe” (Vileikiene & Janusauskiene, 2016, p. 111-116; In Norman & Kpeglo, 2023, pp. 1-5). As has been argued by Eroukmanoff (2018) in the way security is perceived in any system, some of the people may feel safe while the others may feel unsafe. However, Barry Buzan’s position is that, the images of security in people’s minds may not be consistent with objective security. It is possible for a section of the population to feel insecure in an objectively secure space but feel secure in an objectively insecure place (Buzan, 1991).

African women have autonomy and choice, although these ethical values are moderated by family influences, expectations and even dictated by certain circumstances. Economic activities in Africa but for the limitations placed on the rate of return on investment, by bad fiscal policies of central government coupled with the concentration of power plus inflation; high interest rates; and poor national liquidity situation, majority of African women who are self-employed in agriculture and commerce, a cohort with limited formal employment history; seem to have even broader spectrum of choices than their counterparts in the Western world. Either they pursue formal employment or informal jobs, either they choose to trade; work in an office; business; or for the government, or become farmers.

A Western city dweller with no land and access to farmland, may not ever be able to farm, except perhaps, through urban patch gardens or aqua-culture or hydroponic gardening, green house and other choices. But the African woman can simply return to her village and find an acre of land or bigger to farm on from her immediate family and where the family does not have land, the extended family, a neighbor, or someone in that town would be willing to provide her with a space to farm. Although not all the socio-economic conditions are valid in every situation, in every nation, even among the two nations of Britain and Netherlands, Hakim used as cases, those nations cannot meet all the five conditionalities Hakim articulated completely in every case. Among Hakim’s conditionalities under the GPT include the use

of contraceptives; giving women control over their own fertility; these privileges have been available to women for a long time, while the application of her concept or theory only began in 1999. Preference or Choice has informed the decisions of parents and women in Africa, as to whether it was more profitable for women to even go to school, learn trade and make a living, or simply marry and be a stay-at-home mother. Even when there is equal opportunity, some women may opt out of gainful and formal employment in Africa in protest, perhaps, to the limited economic opportunities, low pay and benefits brought on by the incompetencies of patriarchal political leaderships in the various nations. The average African woman particularly those in the peri-urban and rural areas have greater access to arable land comparatively speaking, than those living on the margin in places like U.S.A, UK, Europe and other Westernized nations, which the economists of the world do not count or consider as important variable in estimating relative wellbeing and deprivation of women around the world. The factors that go into the decision for an African woman to be a stay-at-home mother could be very complex or very simple, depending upon the social antecedents of the particular woman, which may include choice, unplanned pregnancy, the lack of funds or access to abortion clinics, or the lack of a benevolent supporter to bear the cost of abortion.

Whereas preferences may cause changes in the fertility of Western women (choosing career over child-bearing), in Africa, women are able to combine childbearing and career, farming, trading and other commercial activities, again due to the network of support from grandmothers, mothers, other family members, who step in to help to care for the baby, the toddler, the child without reliance on Day-care centers or nannies.

1.4 How GPT fares in Germany

Hakim's theory and its variables, though not meant for African women, cannot be said to be even for women in Germany, or other Western nations, where there is strong and reliable, even generous public policy, social policy and family support network for maternal care, financial incentives and positive attitudes towards women with the capacity to bear children. In the case of Germany, the government has chosen to partner with families and with women when it comes to protecting the growth of the family, not in a paternalistic way, but in response to what the people want. [Katinka Barysch \(2014\)](#) wrote that "[...] most German mums do not work in the first year after their child was born". In the UK, mothers go back to between 6 and 9 months. Whereas in the UK, job positions are usually kept for one year, "German mums have the right to return to their previous jobs and positions up to three years after giving birth" ([Ibid, 2014](#), para. 3-4). She continued that, "it is only when the kids become teenagers (around age 15) that more German mothers return to full-time work. Still, more than two-thirds stay part-time; and one-third stay home" ([ibid, para. 6](#)). To the phenomenon observed about Western women, it appears "female emancipation never got off the ground in Germany" ([Spiegel International, 2006](#), para. 2).

The magazine added that, "sexual equality is nothing but a 'myth' in Germany" due to punitive tax system that does not reward double income households. "The future of female emancipation is not just a problem for women, it has disastrous consequences for the entire nation's: the median age of the population is on the rise and the birth rate is declining dramatically" ([Ibid, 2006](#), para. 1-10). It is a well-known fact that in Sub-Saharan African nations that, whereas in the West, issues of paternalism, autonomy and even choice are more vividly and vociferously applied to the individual's right to privacy, access to healthcare delivery services, abortion rights, etc., ([Buchanan, 2008](#); [Gostin et al., 2005](#); [Nussbaum, 1999](#); [Emmanuel & Emmanuel, 1962](#)) in Africa, these values often relate to the broader family or couple. The fact of the matter is that, the ethical standards of the Western industrialized nations cannot be evaluated on the same ethical paradigm as, for example, those of Ghana or Nigeria. "This is due to a myriad of reasons including the lack of standardization in medical training and local, regional and national practice ([Sivalingam, 2011](#)). This is why the advocacy in this paper proposes that a fresh look is taken at ethics from the lens of the respective nations of the sub-region" ([Norman, 2015](#), pp. 97-98).

In a typical African couple's life, six to twelve months after the consummation of the marriage, in-laws and relatives on both sides of the couple begin asking questions about why there was no pregnancy or issue from the couple, or at least, not taken seed yet? Such questions are posed to the couple for as long as they remain childless, no matter the responses they give each time. Therefore, the issue of choice is not really a valid matter to be handled by a woman in marriage in many African nations as to when to get pregnant. Duty to bear children, provided the woman

is biologically able, is a social imperative, irrespective of the antecedents of the woman, whether she is a school teacher, a medical doctor, a lawyer, or even a judge. In such a situation, GPT has very little cultural or operational significance. Therefore, Hakim's theory or concept even in the Western world, probably did not include women who were originally immigrants from the developing world, but who may have lived in their new and adopted nations probably all their lives.

2 Methods

The author conducted ethnographical investigation by observing women in polygamous relationships in fishing villages along the West Coast of Greater Accra municipality, namely Kokrobite, Osheyie, and Bortianor, and other villages in Gomoa East District, namely Dampase, Nyanyano town, Central Region on the Gulf of Guinea. The author chose to immerse himself into these communities in situ, because they follow conventional cultural ethos in marriages, funerals and christening ceremonies (Russell et al., 2012, pp. 455-461). As an observer-participant, the author did not keep day to day epidemiologic records of how many hours the study subjects were observed, although the author paid friendly and social visits to 30 of the families in the villages combined, in order to have the flexibility to move among the settlers without calling attention to himself. Each of the visits lasted between 15 minutes and one hour or more, depending whether the event was a funeral, a wedding, mundane social work and greetings; and the issues discussed. Admittedly, a bit of subterfuge or harmless deceit is incorporated in ethnographical study approach, despite the ethical intentions of the researcher. However, so long as the subjects' autonomy and privacy are protected, ethnography offers probably the best approach to author observation and participation research. No photographs or audio and video recordings were made. Caution was exercised before engaging the participants including asking permission from them whether they had a moment to converse with the author (Adhikari, 2023, pp. 1-11; Interaction Design Foundation, 2016). The inhabitants of these villages consisted of multiple tribes with the predominant tribes in the Greater Accra area being Ga, and in those in the Central Region towns being Ga-Adengbe and Fanti. The primary occupations in these communities are fishing, farming, and service industries. Additionally, many of the observations of this author are commonplace events that many others whether they were in such marriages and relationships have also observed about the cultural practices of the Ghanaian. The author searched for philosophy, psychology, economics, applied sociology, gender studies, productivity and ethics journals and databases such as Scopus, Medline, Hunari, Springer and Google Scholar for thematic materials on the various effects. The author also conducted searches of the various publications of United Nations-cum-Feminist Organizations and other agencies dealing with development, human rights, labor and personal security for policy papers on women empowerment at the grassroots and higher levels, or that addressed the central themes of feminist epistemology, feminist theory, productivity and organizational theory. Publications on compensation for stay-at-home mothers as well as motivation issues, together with searches on family, gender preferences, ethics, duty, responsibility, and autonomy were conducted. Journal and newspaper editorials, blogs and published papers in the English Language were assessed from several institutional libraries in Accra, and others that are virtually or physically accessible to the author. Hand searching of selected printed journals many of which were cited in this paper was conducted to find reported studies arising out of traditional and modern marital choices of women. During the documentary and the internet searches, the author used carefully designed phrases like, "historical practices of polygamy and African ethics", "motherhood and work-ethic of women in Ghana", "Nexus between concubinage and polygamy in West African nations", "what role do women in polygamy play towards the self-actualization of the family?", "What are the variations in the polygamous marriages". The inclusion criteria for the literature and other published papers were polygamy, concubinage, and motherhood as linkages between individuals and faith, marriage or romantic relationship with men as a national source of pride and cultural affirmation or merely the promotion of the selfish interests of women engaged in such relationships. Opinions, book chapters on the themes, followed by duty, obligation and responsibility of the participants in such endeavors, and even newspaper articles dealing with the issues were accessed. All in all, 55 papers were selected from over two million entries from the different jurisdictions and sources, most of which were rejected. Those selected opportunistically from the random searches, were analyzed and the findings summarized and reported as part of the literature review and results. The author found a few pertinent gray and published literature on Ghana in relation to the themes,

which was included in this report. Each of the specific papers was read and briefed after a step-by-step and page-by-page investigation to assess how it impacted or affected the national practice of polygamy, concubinage and motherhood. The author disaggregated the papers, read them again and selected the ones that dealt with the topic. After that the papers were grouped into their respective units for analysis, the author summarized the findings and interpreted them based upon the author's education, skills, knowledge in professional codes of ethics, law and normative ethics.

3 Report on Outcome

3.1 Capability and Functionings: Concubinages and Polygamy, and Opportunities

To assess the capabilities and functioning of African women engaged in polygamy and concubinages as part of the larger expressions of gender preferences, the author observed, through ethnographical approach several modern families engaged in polygamy. It is important to clear the general misgivings that, women who find themselves in polygamy were compelled by their economic and social situations into such marital arrangements. Some also argue that those women were culturally forced into polygamy (Adewale et al., 2021). During the investigation, which spanned over sixteen weeks of observations and multiple social encounters and additional information from the neighborhoods of the informal participants, it was discovered that such allegations were not supported by the lived experiences of the women who were in such relationships, controlling for religious experiences, for example, Islamic religion in 2024. Having more than one wife or even three wives, is allowed under Islamic law, provided the man can cater to their needs on equal terms. Customary law in Ghana also allows polygamy with no limit as to the number of wives a man could have compared to Islam which allows up to four wives. In the interest of full disclosure, it is important to declare that each of the author's two maternal grandfathers and grandmothers were engaged in polygamous marriages in Ashanti and Central Regions of Ghana. There are instances where men who have had traditional marriages, may opt for statutory or ordinance marriages to another women. Although marriage by ordinance is strictly monogamous, there are many couples in Ghana who have found a way to have both monogamy and polygamy in their nuclei family situations (Alhassan, 2023). Rauf Alhassan found prevalence rate of polygamy among Ghanaian Christians at 12.2%, with Anglicans registering 15%, Catholics, 13.9% and the Methodist with only 8.4%. As of the year, 2025, there are a handful of Ghana's parliamentarians who are known to be engaged in polygamous marriages with social satisfaction and acceptability among a significant segment of the population. The author encountered several women, one a medical doctor and the other a holder of PhD in the social sciences who were engaged in polygamy and who were adherents of traditional religion. Family A: The medical doctor was glad to be in marriage with two other women, one a qualified Basic School Teacher of Science and the other a stay-at-home mother. The husband of these three women was a politician with national reach, and reasonable number of investments in Concrete products for real estate development, road construction and retailing of building materials. Family B: The PhD holder was in a marital relationship with another woman who was also a banker working for one of the national critical banking institutions with oversight responsibility of commercial banks in Ghana. The husband of the two women was a lawyer with a good social standing and reasonable number of well-paying clients. Each of the family units lived in five, and four, bedroom homes with ample land surrounding their homes with fence walls and gated. Each home had more than four sedan vehicles and one each SUV. The children played together in each home and hardly intermingled with the other children in the neighborhoods. The informal conversations with these women showed that, there was no regret by any of the women for their choices. There was mutual respect for each of the women, who were engaged in each of the polygamous unions observed by the author. The compelling question which each of the women answered was whether this was their dream marriage set-up growing up as young women. The responses summed up that,

"It was comforting to know that when one was busy with work, there was a responsible guardian who was taking care of the children" (Family A).

Another woman in a polygamous marriage, stated that,

"The stress of caring for the family, both the children and the husband is a shared responsi-

bility that enhances their social and personal wellbeing and satisfaction” (Family B).

Juxtaposing this viewpoint affirms the gender standpoint theory but ambiguates the gender preference ideation, due to the inherent conflict between feminist epistemology and patriarchal social controls over women’s choices.

The Gender Preference Theory, (GPT) is not only about the choices women have to make between domestic life and career opportunities, but concerns also the intersectionality of women’s rights in the generalities of life and the complex life affirming decisions women have to make between competing options: career or motherhood, marriage or both. If it is marriage, or motherhood, or career or a combination of choices, how does one achieve her true potential or goals in life? “The capability approach to a person’s advantage is concerned with evaluating it in terms of his or her actual ability to achieve various valuable functions as part of living”. Capability approach may use vectors such as personal utility (focus on pleasure, happiness or desire fulfillment), absolute or relative opulence (focus on community bundles real income, or real wealth) assessment of negative freedoms (focus on procedural fulfillment of libertarian rights, and rules of non-interference), comparison of means of freedom (focus on the holdings of “primary goods”, as in the Rawlsian theory of justice and comparison of resources, holding as a basis of just equality (Sen, 1993, p. 31). Nobel Laurette, Professor Amartya Sen has been instrumental in developing the matrix for the Human Development Index of 1994 under the auspices of the United Nations Development Program, (UNDP). It has become part of the classic measure of government policy assessment and how it may have improved the wellbeing of the citizens of the nation under review. For this singular reason, it is germane to ask the question, where does African feminism sit in relation to the HDP Index and where too, does men situate, if society advances the interests of women over that of men? It appears convenient for society to blame the retarded progress of women in Africa on factors such as patriarchy, masculinity, culture, politics, neo-patrimonialism, identity politics and a whole long list of reasons, some relevant, and others irrelevant. If one juxtaposes the preferences of women against the capabilities and functioning concept, the fact that women have expressed their preferences to be stay-at-home mothers or work, isn’t that evidence of capability and functionings? Should capabilities of a woman be determined by her right to choose or should it be determined by her personal utility the expression of which may yield outcomes such as “pleasure”; “happiness”; or “desire fulfillment” (Sen, 1993, p. 31). If functionings represent the “state of a person – the various things that he or she manages to do or be in leading a life” (ibid. p.32) and “capabilities” reflect (choice) or the alternative combinations of functionings, can’t the person achieve or “chooses one collection of options” or the other? How can an African woman who may self-describe as a feminist, even though she may be the second or third wife in a polygamous marriage be said to have capabilities and functioning, and that to her, the value - objects in her life include the fact that, she is the second or third wife of a capable man, who loves her with the freedom to do the things that make her happy and fulfilled? As respected and admired as Amartya Sen is, applying the capabilities approach to certain segments of the African societies may be problematic.

In the example of the woman in a polygamous marriage, who still describes herself as a feminist, it casts the concept of capabilities and functionings into a situation similar to when a child who is being forced to wear a pair of shoes which is one or two sizes below his or her shoe size. There is a strange and often, unaddressed dichotomy between women engaged in polygamous marriages who may also call themselves as feminists. Polygamy is common in Africa, and in West Africa, there is a greater incidence of the practice than in some other parts of Africa. In addition, concubinages and sugar daddism or mams are also present to complicate the lives of men who may be in a polygamous relationship, and who at the same time retains several sidekicks. As a general rule, the overall share of polygamous marriages in Sub-Saharan Africa is only 11%. “In Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea, Niger, Nigeria, and Gambia, at least, a quarter of the population lives in polygamous homes” (Pew Research Center, 2019).

3.2 Feminist Standpoint application in Polygamy, Concubinages and Motherhood

Feminism is situated or embedded in freedom and justice like a person’s ability to embrace his or her functionings and capabilities, through combinations of values which may not make her a victim or a slave of masculine men or patriarchal control proponents, but one where she feels emancipated to do what she sees to be good or of great utilitarian value for her. It is

what it is: culture, values, essence, functionings and contentment. Feminist Standpoint Theory was developed by [Harding \(1986\)](#) and [Smith \(1987\)](#). They argued that women tend to have different appreciation and understanding of social issues from the standpoint of being victims of marginalisation compared to the views of the dominant group, presumably males in power positions. The inherent differences between men and women due to sex attributions, does not necessarily lead often to dichotomous viewpoints on many issues concerning freedom, fairness as justice and human rights. The 2024 election of President Donald Trump in the United States of America, after so many negative misogynistic accusations against him appears to support the position that women do not differ much from males on many national and economic issues. Despite the obvious differences which could be assumed, women's appraisal of issues of betrayal, injustice, and abuse are not dramatically different from those of males. Proponents of Feminist Standpoint Theory tend to argue that marginalised people possess insights into their subjective experiences better than the oppressors. This thinking is only true, to a large extent, if the oppressors conduct can be described as incidental or accidental, and not executed with intentionality with the expected outcome well-noted or appreciated by the oppressors? If the oppressor was not aware of the expected outcome of the oppression, then the act could conveniently be described as untended consequences of intersectional dynamics of society without the intention to harm any group of persons, whether women or men. In society as a whole, women's contribution either in science or politics is not considered as supplementary but essential part of human endeavor although there are other researchers who disagree with the incidental analysis in the military and security leadership domains ([Duncanson, 2011](#); [Winslow, 1999](#)). It appears Feminist Standpoint Theory ignores gender differences and gender preferences ([Hakim, 2000](#); [Said, 2010](#)). Feminism promotes subjectivity among different women influenced by race, class and social status, which risks the potential for sidelining a potentially large cohort of women due to oversimplification of the concerns or views of other women.

Such thinking may have led some feminist literature to propose that Marriam Ba is a feminist because she wrote her book, *So Long a Letter*, (1978) a story about a Senegalese woman, Ramatoulaye, who had married a polygamous man, Modou, but who died sometime in their marriage. They argued that, she stated the feminist standpoint in marriages in Senegal, however, this is not the case. He who goes to equity should have clean hands. Ba adopted creative license in order to make her feminist standpoint on polygamy. Although various commentaries of the novel claim it is about the role of women in post-colonial Africa, it really is not about the comprehensive role of women at all but an unrealistic narrative. If the protagonist belongs to a patriarchal clan, the widow in reality and according to custom, is not the one who organizes the funeral of her dead husband. The widow is not even allowed to meet other mourners except at a distance. Mourners cannot even shake the hand of the widow in many African cultures. Marriama Ba obviously took a creative license to exploit the culture but ignored the bespoken cultural Muslim traits, let alone African culture of burial as practiced in the Senegal. Being the first wife, Ba narrated that Ramatoulaye had to organize the funeral of Modou while the second wife, Benitou sat and collected most of the donations the family received that day. In the story, Marriama Ba goes on to recount other marriages in both the conventional and monogamous as well as polygamous ways ([Ibid, 1978](#)). In each of these marriages, and in real life, polygamous marriages (several of which this author has been a witness), there is functioning because the wives and the husbands show happiness, pleasure and desire fulfilled with hope that their collective and individual future will be brighter than if they were alone in their marriages; with a sense of "absolute or relative opulence" all of which are aspects of capabilities and functionings ([Sen, 1993](#), pp. 31-34). Some African writers and researchers tell phantasmagorical stories when they want to attack the so-called patriarchal society. A case in point is the narrative about burial rites.

3.3 Burial Rites and widowhood in many African Tribal or Clan cultures

I will take time to provide the inculpatory evidence that Marriama Ba did not describe the burial rites of Muslim people in Senegal in the manner of the tradition and the way the practice goes. Samuel P. Chukwu-Okorankulo provided us with his work: *Culture of widowhood Practices in Africa: De-institutionalizing the plight of women and Communicating Development through theater*, (2015). Indigenous South Africa widow mourning tradition is similar to the many ethnic groups mourning traditions in West Africa. "The widow is expected to mourn for

at least 12 months, dressed in mostly black or dark or navy-blue colors. Just as it is in South Africa, in West Africa a widow is considered married still to her husband". The "mourning ritual for women in Africa is stricter than it is for men", it comes under "patriarchal ideologies" (Khosa-Nkatini, 2022, pp. 1-2). Among the members of the Zulu Community of Ndwendwe, North of Durban in the KwaZulu Natal province, the one-year confinement, and isolation of widows is about the same as what is practiced in the rest of Africa (Daber, 2003, pp. 1-108). Immediately after the announcement that the husband is dead, the woman was or is made to go into isolation, social distancing of some sort, and the avoidance of person-to-person contact, but observed by a cohort of women relatives or friends. Even access to modern tools of communication such as mobile phones and computers are taken away from her (Khosa-Nkanini, 2022, p. 2). The different rituals a woman undergoes upon the death of the husband is, (at least in Ghana) hinged on erroneous but conventional rationale that, "the man died because his wife is an unlucky woman, whose misfortune directly contributed to her husband's demise (Dorgbetor, 2021, pp. 1367-1369). According to Tei-Ahontu (2008), the Ga traditional area of the Greater Accra region, a widow wears black for one year. After that she wears all white for another year, one year of confinement. Tei-Ahontu makes unfamiliar statement which goes against the grain of public health as well as traditional values propagated as part of social etiquette for healthy living and wellbeing. He stated that widows are made "to drink the water used in bathing the corpse, and the widow sleeps with the corpse overnight" (Ibid, 2008; In Dorgbetor, 2021, p. 1369). Ethnographical and qualitative search by the author, to fact-check the claims made by Tei-Ahontu, did not reveal any such practice among Ga people during interviews with native Ga people in Ga settlement of Kokrobite, Bortianor, Aplaku of both sexes in the Greater Accra region. The likelihood that the respondents may have prevaricated their responses to the question: "are widows in Ga tribe made to drink the bath water of their dead husbands as part of the ritual of pre-burial ceremony" the author posed is high, but doubtful. The author has also attended a number of Ga funerals in Ga settlements in Greater Accra region and has not heard or seen such practices. If the Ga widows are being made to drink the bath water of their dead husbands, this is a practice which goes against the aggressive and contentious nature of Ga women generally speaking, women who are known for their bravery and propensity for physical attack and confrontation with members of either sex, including even some of their husbands. A true Ga woman won't drink the bathwater of the dead husband under any circumstances. Perhaps, that statement had some credibility in the so-called olden days but such a practice would not be tolerated in the post-independence era or even in the colonial era which incidentally had stronger and stricter sanitation and hygiene laws and practices, regulations and enforcement system than any of the post-independence governments' practices on sanitation and hygiene.

Patriarchal societies led by masculine men were not suicidal and would not oversee a self-destructive cultural practice with the potential to spread diseases, illness and death to the rest of the community members. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that the cultural practice of isolating the widow, confined to the room in which she lived with the husband before his death is part of quarantine and isolation practice to assess if the widow may be suffering from the same disease through transmission due to bodily contact and living in close proximity with the dead husband prior to his demise. It could also be that the sequestration of the widow from other people until the internment of the dead husband was probably informed by subterfuge and plotting against the property and material interests of the wife, although the sharing of the deceased property does not actually occur until, in some communities, one year after the burial, while the period varies among different groups. Unreliable statements about a culture made by researchers should be corrected. The fact still remains that, among patriarchal and even matriarchal societies, whether the members are Muslims or Christians, "it is the man's family's duty to bury the deceased and perform all necessary funeral rites ("adua" for Islam) within 3-7 days or 40 days at most. Among Muslims, all funeral donations (unless otherwise given to the widow/widower directly) is collected and shared among the Imams and Mallams who sat for the "adua". Though some donations could be raised specifically to the support of the deceased's family, since in Islam, "sunnah" there will be no cooking in the bereaved family for 3 days. This is done at the burial ceremony or immediately at the gathering of family and Muslim Ummah on the same day the deceased is buried" (Sani, 2024). The fact still remains that, it is generally agreed upon that, widowhood rituals are disproportionately discriminatory against women's human rights, although some have rested the support for the practice on moral, ethical and health basis, such as no hand-shaking, social distancing, not sharing personal effects such as a drinking cup of the widow with the rest of the family. Despite these factors affecting

women's right to equal opportunity even in burial of their husbands, it is difficult to accept that a widow under patriarchal masculine culture combined, namely being Muslim and being African, the widow will be saddled with the responsibility of organizing the funeral of the deceased husband as described by Marriama Ba in her book.

4 Conclusion

African women who engage or choose to engage in polygamy have the right to describe themselves as feminists much in the same way that women who engage in same sex marriages do describe themselves as feminists. The feminist standpoint theory allows for intersectional approaches to the same issue by many participants within the same ecosystem or social group. For this reason, the issue of gender preference theory should accommodate individual notions of being a woman, working or being a stay-at-home mother or a combination of both, irrespective of the marital status of the particular woman. Whiles some women find solace, capabilities and functionings in monogamy, others may find the things that make them happy and capable citizens in polygamy. Choice making is the right of everyone whether that person subscribes to feminism, African traditional or orthodox religion, whether one lives in a cosmopolitan environment or a rustic village life. The important thing is the capacity to choose, the right to autonomy and the absence of encroachment of such rights by any group or entity, so long as the rights of others are not being trampled upon.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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