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On the question of polygamy

Abdul Kadir Riyadi, Surabaya | Opinion | Fri, November 06 2009, 11:06 AM

Amid the great anticipation that women in Indonesia may be emancipated in their educational, social, political and cultural life, we as a nation were astounded by the media news that a polygamy club with international networks was established in the town of Bandung, with hundreds of families having already joined.

In a somewhat unprecedented manner, the members of the club emerged on TV, giving testimonies on the benefits and goodness of polygamy. These members — many of them women — testify that through polygamous marriage they are happier and more stable both in their family and social lives.

But there are also equally great concerns being expressed on the nature of both polygamy and the club. One would first of all wonder why there should be a club to promote such an institution? Is polygamy something good that needs to be promoted and propagated? Is it normal or even necessary?

Whatever answer we may have to these questions, it seems clear that for many of us in this country polygamy is one of the discredited institutions of marriage. We have seen so many cases where public figures lose their integrity because of their involvement in polygamous marriages.

However, for men polygamy has become a popular "culture", even though the practice indeed has haunting consequences of dismantling the family structure or destroying one's economic advantages.

And while members of the club were seemingly confident that polygamy was the answer for the many social malaises and even economic-related problems, it is all a bit too lovey-dovey, frankly, that co-wives can just adore one another, and "can't imagine home" without each other.

Far from it, a husband can never divide his heart equally between two wives or more, nor can he enjoy a fully vibrant conscience or heart, or a happy matrimony such as that which comes from fidelity to a single wife.

A polygamous marriage is often based on sexual desire rather than love, honor and understanding. It also has no strong grounding in Islam. Many polygamous Muslims miss the point that the Koran regards men and women as on par, and that — by virtue of the conditions laid down — Islam never advocates polygamy. Islam adopts the idea of compatibility between husband and wife, men and women.



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To think polygamy is accepted easily by Islam is disappointing. Polygamy, in essence, is little more than conjugal betrayal to the marriage, and Islam therefore discourages it.

The Koran does speak of polygamy, but the verse is subject to intense controversy. Some Muslims have even gone so far as to say that in essence polygamy is not Islamic. It is permitted only — and only — under certain strict conditions such as a man's first wife being barren or seriously ill.

The historical reading of the polygamy verse, meanwhile, reveals that when Islam appeared and sanctioned polygamy it saw the benefits behind it. But it also introduced safeguards against the detrimental aspects of this practice by restricting the number of the wives to four. Prior to Islam there were no limits on the number of wives a man could be married.

Islam also makes additional marriages conditional upon the husband's commitment to treating his wives fairly and equitably. This condition, if taken literally leaves no room for a man to marry a second wife because "no man could be fair to multiple wives" the Koran implies.

The only reading of the Koranic verse that would justify polygamy as permissible is a patriarchal reading. The changing of social scene in the majority of Islamic societies is the key reason behind the emergence of this form of interpretation. The reading basically maintains that women have no equal pride or place in society.

If anything, the argument that Islam enshrines women's status as inferior to men indicates inadequate knowledge of Islam and its law. A careful examination of the Islamic philosophy concerning the relations between men and women reveals that Islam considers them absolutely equal.

The false image of women in Islam has nothing to do with the teaching and ideals of Islam as with the erroneous, gender-focused reading of it.

What this means we — as Muslims — must speak out and promote the true ideals of Islam as far as marriage and family life is concerned. Polygamy cannot be justified and must therefore be stopped.

We should keep in mind that all practices that harm women, no matter how deeply they are embedded in culture, must be eradicated. After all, when Islam was first propagated by the holy prophet, it provided a framework for change, supplying guidelines for establishing equality for all servants of God — irrespective of their color, religion, culture or gender.

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