

A Brief Examination of Women's Agency in Mormon Polygamy Prior to Its Criminalization in 1878

By Madison Richards

This research explores why some adult Mormon women chose and defended polygamy from 1852 until 1878. The goal of this review is to compare the expressed pros and cons of polygamy from its implementation to criminalization, considering public opinion and personal accounts of Mormon women in polygamous marriages. The conclusion drawn is that polygamous marriages often had a positive effect on the Mormon women who entered them in the late 19th and early 20th centuries because they allowed these women true agency not granted in non-Mormon American society.

Monogamy between heterosexuals is considered by many in the western world to be normal, and therefore accepted without question. Any threat to this construct is often argued as an indication of eventual societal collapse, as evidenced in debates regarding homosexuality, asexuality, or any other relationship that goes beyond the bounds of one man and one woman. Among these types of relationships, polygamy, also known as plural marriage, has been attacked so strongly by the opposition that it has even united people who would normally be on opposing sides of any given issue. North America, South America, Europe, Australia, and most of Asia have, however, implemented laws set against polygamy; while a few societies that do allow and practice polygamy include parts of northern Africa and several cultures in the Middle East. Despite this opposition, polygamy has been observed throughout recorded human history, and is still in practice this day.

The main argument posed against polygamous

marriages is that it is “a form of female bondage, rife with sexual and emotional oppression and exploitation.”¹ Michelle Gibson, a professor in the Department of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Cincinnati, cites Warren Jeffs as a current example of the type of oppression women could endure in a polygamous marriage. Jeffs, a member of the Fundamentalist Latter-Day Saints (FLDS), was convicted on two counts of rape-of-a-minor and was sentenced to life in jail in addition to twenty years.² Among his 19 or so wives, two were underage, only 12 and 15-years old when they were wed to Jeffs. He also allegedly molested a few of his young male cousins over an unspecified number of years. Warren Jeffs has become the face of modern Mormon polygamy, in part because his multiple marriages to adolescents shocked modern audiences, but also because polygamy is no longer legal as it was in the mid to late 1800s. In other words, Americans

1 Michelle Gibson. “‘However Satisfied Man Might Be’: Sexual Abuse in Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints Communities.” (Journal Of American Culture, 2010), 280-293

2 Ibid, 283.

have moved onto other moral queries, so polygamy has fallen to the wayside for modern audiences, seeing as the law has already rectified it. Moreover, the reason why many have placed Jeffs as the epicenter of modern polygamy is because many people assume those who are engaged in polygamous relationships cannot have the same moral compass as other Americans.

Rather than taking a stance on the morality of polygamous relationships or relationships involving underage children, an analysis of the experiences of adult Mormon women who have chosen and defended polygamy since its implementation in 1843, has revealed much more about society as an entity. Mormon women not only voiced their opinions about polygamy in publications, such as the Women's Exponent, but also voiced their thoughts on suffrage

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and women's rights as a whole.³ Upon analysis of the varying views and experiences of polygamy, from its implementation to when it was criminalized, I assert that polygamous marriages had a positive effect on the Mormon women who entered into them because it allowed them true agency that outside American society could not necessarily grant.

Historical Context and Public Opinion

To contextualize the role of polygamy within Mormonism, it's important to understand when and how it was introduced. In the early 1820s, Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, experienced his first revelation from God. Smith frequently had visions perceived, by him and his followers, to be the direct word from God. As a result of these revelations, Smith declared that plural marriage was to be introduced into the church. Several theories as to why God would decree such a practice have been posited to include: reproducing more children in the faith, preventing social issues such as infidelity and prostitution, and providing widowed women protection. By 1843, the practice was widely accepted via the publication

³ Joan Iversen. “Feminist Implications of Mormon Polygyny.” (Feminist Studies, 1984), 502-522.

of “Doctrines and Covenants” (1835), a book of canonical scripture including revelations from Joseph Smith, but wasn't popularized across the continent until 1852. The official LDS Church website has an essay expressing their current view of this revelation and practice:

“During the years that plural marriage was publicly taught, all Latter-day Saints were expected to accept the principle as a revelation from God. Not all, however, were expected to live it. Church leaders viewed plural marriage as a command to the Church generally, while recognizing that individuals who did not enter the practice could still stand approved of God. Women were free to choose their spouses, whether to enter into a polygamous or monogamous union, or whether to marry at all. Some men entered plural marriage because they were asked to do so by Church leaders, while others initiated the process themselves; all were required to obtain the approval of Church leaders before entering a plural marriage.”⁴

This clarifies several misconceptions many non-Mormons have about polygamy. Polygamy, from the beginning, was not forced and women had the agency to choose what kind of marriage they wanted to pursue. It is possible that the Church heavily encouraged plural marriage among eligible men and women, but it was ultimately an individual choice. Even at its height, only a maximum of 20 percent of Mormon families were polygamous.⁵ The members of the LDS stress the concept of agency because they believe God gave humans the ability to decide for themselves, and through agency people are able to learn and rightfully choose salvation. For current members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, “the polygamy charge annoys Mormons because it is so far out of date,” and no longer has real relevance.⁶ Nonetheless, the stigma of polygamy has tarnished public perception of Mormonism and its adherents.

⁴ “Plural Marriage and Families in Early Utah.” (lds.org).

⁵ Joan Iversen. “Feminist Implications of Mormon Polygyny.” (Feminist Studies, 1984), 508.

⁶ Richard Lyman Bushman. Very Short Introductions: Mormonism: A Very Short Introduction. (Oxford University Press, 2008), 2.

Prior to the Church's endorsement and implementation of polygamy, much of the United State population regarded Mormons as dangerous due to their growing numbers and tendency to vote as a block, which could mean political sway. Tensions rose between Mormons and fellow Missouri inhabitants until climaxing in the Mormon War of 1838. From August 6, 1838 to November 1, 1838, 22 people were killed in total, most of them Mormons.⁷ This conflict caused the Mormons to move first to Nauvoo, Illinois before finally settling in Utah in 1847.⁸ Joseph Smith's assassination in Carthage, Illinois, was the catalyst that spurred Brigham Young to lead the Church's exodus in search of their Zion, or their "heaven on Earth." Utah was acquired by the United States in 1850 during the Organic Act of Congress as a territory but was not made a state until 1896.⁹ The Mormon pioneers posed a threat to the Union's morals, specifically their views on marriage and slavery, which hindered their admittance into the United States as a full-fledged state.

Fanny Stenhouse and the Anti-Polygamy Narrative

Plural marriage was promoted by leaders of the Church, but there were still many members who remained divided. Kathleen Flake, a Mormon scholar and historian, notes that prior to the 19th century, marriage was for pragmatic purposes, such as procreation, money, societal advancement, and security.¹⁰ Marriages were treated like business transactions, typically negotiated by the individuals' families. The importance of marriage was particularly emphasized for women. If they did not marry, they remained a financial burden on their family because women did not truly have a place in the public sphere, and many were unable to earn on their own. In order to spare their families money and embarrassment, most women did all they could to find a man who would marry and support them.

7 Stephen C. LeSueur, *The 1838 Mormon War in Missouri* (University of Missouri Press, 1987), 131-142.

8 "Mormon Pioneer: History & Culture," National Park Service, accessed March 24, 2018, <https://www.nps.gov/mopi/learn/historyculture/index.htm>

9 Stan Layton. "Brief History: This is Utah," Utah History to Go, accessed on March 23, 2018, http://historytogo.utah.gov/facts/brief_history/

10 Kathleen Flake. *Emotional and Priestly Logic of Plural Marriage*. (Utah: Utah State Special Collection, 2010), 4.

Many marriages of this sort resulted in mutual respect for one's partner, and in some situations, love blossomed. However, this was not always the case; the purpose of marriage was not to fan the flames of passion, but rather to carry out one's duty as a man or woman. While polygamy was gaining traction within the Church, the concept of marrying for love was becoming the norm for couples across America, creating a rift between the two religious groups. To non-Mormons, "Mormonism's 19th-century marriage practices seemed to contradict [modern] marital ideals in every respect."¹¹ Mormons were already seen as different than Christian-Americans—Mormons were abolitionists who threatened to sway which states maintained slavery and had a close-knit community resulting from their lifestyle differences—so the idea of being married to a man with multiple wives seemed to defy logic. People questioned how a woman could love and be loved by a man who had forever tethered himself to other women in the same way, and how it was possible for one's husband be a good man if he had sex with more than woman. The conclusion many non-Mormon Americans arrived at was that these women were not given the opportunity, nor were they encouraged, to seek love—they were imprisoned in these marriages to lustful, greedy, sexually deviant men. This narrative was perpetuated for years until polygamy's eventual criminalization.

Much of anti-polygamy propaganda came from those outside of the faith, but some Mormon women were firmly against the practice. Fanny Stenhouse's *Exposé of Polygamy: A Lady's Life among the Mormons* (1872) details her personal experience in a polygamous marriage and eventual departure from the Church altogether. Stenhouse converted to Mormonism and moved from England where she traveled as missionary with her husband. Their marriage remained monogamous and seemingly fulfilling until they moved to the United States. Upon arrival, Stenhouse observed women in polygamous marriages and marked their dissatisfaction of their situations, some due to abusive husbands, others petty jealousy among wives. Stenhouse became increasingly unhappy as her husband married two more women. Eventually, she concluded that she had "tried earnestly to discover wherein [the whole system of polygamy] was productive of any good; but in not one single instance could [she] find, after the most diligent

11 *Ibid*, 5.

observation, any but the very worst results.”¹² She ultimately declared the practice evil.

Her autobiography was perfect fodder for anti-polygamist arguments and Stenhouse became a leading voice on the matter, even going as far as to tour the U.S. and give talks about the evils of polygamy.¹³ Stenhouse’s writing became popular because it was an inside account of what really went on in polygamous marriages. Stenhouse’s experiences and those of others that she wrote, about are exactly what the public believed about polygamy and Mormons. For many that was enough to condemn Mormons and plural marriage. While Stenhouse’s experiences are valid, the motivation behind writing her autobiography, however, is open to interpretation. It is very clear Stenhouse felt abused in her marriage, but the fact that she felt so wronged that she published a book and toured the nation, could point more toward monetary motivations rather than the purely moral ones she claimed.

Argued Benefits of Polygamy

Amid the anti-polygamy publications, a selection of pro-polygamy literature argued the benefits such an arrangement provides women. Even though there was a shift in marriage motivation, society still had very rigid views on a woman’s place. According to Victorian ideals, men left the home to work in the public sphere while women stayed in the domestic sphere and in this way the women could be “protected and supported by [their] husband[s].”¹⁴ This model was accepted in mainstream America, but as Iverson notes in her essay *Feminist Implications of Mormon Polygyny*, Utah needed as many able-bodied people to work in order to build their Zion, and “there was a definite pattern within polygamy of requiring women to be resourceful and to contribute to the family’s support.”¹⁵ In terms of societal benefits, “LDS women were encouraged to work in nontraditional jobs. By 1874, Utah had developed a ‘respectable class of professional and highly literate women’ and a visitor marveled that ‘they close no

career on a woman in Utah.”¹⁶ In comparison to the non-Mormon women of America, these women had much more latitude in society; they held jobs that women in the rest of the United States wouldn’t have ordinarily been able to hold, which made them more respected by their male counterparts. Non-Mormon women were pressured to simply remain at home and take care of their children, which had negative effects on them emotionally. Many doctors in the mid to late 18th century saw ambition beyond the home as a personal and moral failing in a woman. Women of this time who expressed any desire to venture beyond the domestic sphere were viewed as outcasts in society or were oppressed via medical diagnoses. Admittedly, the agency Mormon women were granted was necessary in order to sustain their families. Multiple mothers in one family likely meant more mouths to feed, more chores to do, and ultimately more money needed to be brought into the home. To accomplish this undertaking, the wives often needed to take on jobs. These women were able to leave the private sphere, and gain skills needed to be an individual.

Mary Elizabeth Horne, on the other hand, had quite a different experience with polygamy. Horne had the unique opportunity of being married monogamously for 28 years before entering into a polygamous marriage, so she was able to speak on both types within the Church. Flake quotes Horne from her book saying:

“Plural marriage destroys the oneness, of course, but to her that oneness had meant ‘she was so bound and so united to her husband that she could do nothing without him.’ Though it had been a ‘trial of feelings her feelings’ to lose it... ‘she is [now] freer and can do herself individually things she never could have attempted before; and work out her individual character as separate from her husband.’”¹⁷

Horne acknowledges the challenges presented by plural marriage, but since her husband’s attention was occasionally directed elsewhere, she could explore who she was as a woman and participate more fully in society. In 1870, women were granted suffrage by territorial legislature, and for seventeen years, Utah

¹⁶ Ibid, 510.

¹⁷ Kathleen Flake. *Emotional and Priestly Logic of Plural Marriage*. (Utah: Utah State Special Collection, 2010), 9.

¹² Fanny Stenhouse. “Exposé of Polygamy: A Lady’s Life among the Mormons.” Edited by Linda Wilcox DeSimone (Utah State University Press, 2008), 118.

¹³ Ibid, 1

¹⁴ Kathleen Flake. *Emotional and Priestly Logic of Plural Marriage*. (Utah: Utah State Special Collection, 2010), 11.

¹⁵ Joan Iverson. “Feminist Implications of Mormon Polygyny.” (*Feminist Studies*, 1984), 510-511.

women were able to do what other American women weren't legally allowed for another 50 years—vote for a candidate of their choosing and participate in political discourse.¹⁸ It was these Utah women who became educated and wrote on behalf of women and polygamy. The *Woman's Exponent*, the first publication owned and published by Latter-day Saint women—fully endorsed by the Church—is a prime example of these advancements.¹⁹ Through this literature, Mormon women defended polygamy and “strongly opposed the concept of women as passive ornaments and urged the education of girls for self-sufficiency.”²⁰

Trouble in Zion: Reynolds v. United States

Despite Mormon women voicing their support for polygamy, the rest of the country remained in strict opposition and refused to understand how these women could choose polygamy over monogamy. It also became clear that polygamy was the main issue preventing Utah from gaining statehood. Utah, from its founding in 1850 until 1896, was an incorporated territory, meaning that the U.S. Constitution applied to Utah's inhabitants. Many Mormons firmly believed their right to practice polygamy was guaranteed under the First Amendment because it was the word of God. Tensions surrounding laws banning polygamy mounted for years until 1878 when George Reynolds took this issue to the Supreme Court. Reynolds, secretary to Brigham Young, acted as an intentional representative for all Mormons when he went into court. In a precedent-setting decision, the Supreme Court ruled against Reynolds and the United States officially banned polygamy, criminalizing its practice.²¹

The Mormon Church later outlawed polygamy in 1890. Following the death of Joseph Smith, the Church had its first set of schisms based on

disagreements regarding the future of Mormonism. The *Reynolds v. United States* ruling caused outrage in the community and Mormonism suffered further fractures based on who did and did not want to continue practicing polygamy. Currently, there are six main branches within the Mormon faith and most of them exclusively practice monogamy. The Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (FLDS), founded in the 1930s, is not a significant branch in terms of size. Despite its membership of around 700 people, the FLDS is the largest branch to still practice polygamy in the U.S. Their prophet is none other than Warren Jeffs, and despite his imprisonment, he still has devoted followers. The Latter-day Saints Church is the currently the largest branch of Mormonism; they have strict rules against plural marriage and only recognize marriage between one man and one woman.

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Even though Mormon women were eventually denied the right to enter and engage in polygamous marriages in America, their effects were known and felt. Unlike their monogamous counterparts, plural wives were able to invest in themselves emotionally, intellectually, and physically. These women were able to give back to their community and participate in the democratic process, an experience unique for American women in the 19th century. The novelty of these benefits, however, was short-lived as women across America were granted suffrage in 1920 and access to higher education became more prevalent as the 20th century progressed. Polygamy remains a controversial and complex marital practice that continues to divide people despite how rarely it is practiced in current Western society. Its controversial nature has caused many to instinctively cast it aside as entirely immoral rather than taking the time to critically examine how and why it was implemented. Within the confines of Mormonism, it carried potential for women to take control of their lives during a period that wouldn't normally allow them to do so. The way one sees polygamy entirely depends on whether or not he or she can look past the seemingly

18 Jean Bickmore White. “Women's Suffrage in Utah,” Utah History to Go, accessed March 23, 2018

19 Sherilyn Cox Bennion. “The Woman's Exponent: Forty-Two Years of Speaking of Women.” (Utah Historical Quarterly, 1976), 1571.

20 Joan Iversen. “Feminist Implications of Mormon Polygyny.” (Feminist Studies, 1984), 510.

21 “Reynolds V. United States,” Bill of Rights Institute, accessed March 26, 2018, <http://www.billofrightsinstitute.org/educate/educator-resources/lessons-plans/landmark-supreme-court-cases-lessons/reynolds-v-united-states-1878/>

black and white moral implications and search within the gray space.

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