

Why is traditional polygamy unjust? Implications for egalitarian nonmonogamy

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Abstract

The notion of equality attracts both proponents and critics of nonmonogamy. Inequality is a widely discussed objection to nonmonogamy. Simultaneously, equality is highlighted as a core value in ethical nonmonogamy. The notions of equality and inequality in these debates have not been clearly conceptualized. In order to propose a conception of egalitarian nonmonogamy, it is important to first understand possible inequalities within it. This paper establishes a clearer and in-depth understanding of inequalities in nonmonogamy by categorizing inequalities in traditional polygamy into different kinds. I argue that these inequalities are generally unjust. Although these inequalities are common in traditional polygamy, the objection that polygamy—as a type of marriage—is inherently unequal and unjust is not a convincing argument. By contrast, not all kinds of equality—such as equal love or equal number of partners—are morally significant. I conclude this paper by providing some groundwork for future research on egalitarian nonmonogamy.

KEYWORDS

division of labor in families, equality, family life, family theory, justice, multi-disciplinary research, polygamy

INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality is a central concern in the debates on the ethics of nonmonogamy. Likewise, proponents of ethical nonmonogamy hold equality as one of the core values (e.g., Black, 2006; Haritaworn et al., 2006; Klesse, 2007; Ziegler et al., 2014). However, the notion of equality in these debates has not been clearly conceptualized. In order to offer a more thorough analysis of

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equality in nonmonogamy, I first establish a clearer understanding of inequalities within non-monogamous relationships. I do so by disambiguating various inequalities in traditional polygamy. Although the inequalities discussed in this paper are conceptually distinguishable, I acknowledge that these inequalities often mutually reinforce one another. I draw on several empirical and intersectional studies to highlight how this is the case.

As ethical nonmonogamy has emerged as a popular and widely discussed concept, so has an opportunity to bridge the fields of moral philosophy and family science. Ethics—a foundational yet complex concept in moral philosophy—serves as a framework for examining any domain of life, including family structures. Similarly, the concept of equality—widely debated in political philosophy—can benefit from quantitative, empirical, and intersectional studies to enhance its applicability to lived experiences. As a researcher in the philosophy discipline, my work focuses on ethics within nonmonogamous families and relationships. One of philosophy's key contributions is its focus on conceptual clarity, which can be achieved by defining terms precisely, dissecting assumptions, and critically analyzing the foundational ideas that shape relevant discussions. In this paper, I aim to examine nonmonogamous family dynamics through the lens of ethical and political theories, and hopefully to contribute a unique philosophical perspective to the family field.

This paper is structured as follows. I first introduce the key concepts, including an elaboration on how traditional polygamy is a subset of nonmonogamy in general. Subsequently, I disambiguate the notion of inequality within the existing debates by categorizing various kinds of inequalities in traditional polygamy. I argue that the inequalities as such are more due to external factors such as poverty, hierarchical power relations, and lack of education, rather than the presence of plural marriages. Based on Rawls's (1971/1999) theory of justice, the notion of systemic injustices within families, and luck egalitarianism—I argue that the inequalities identified in this paper are generally unjust, as they undermine some family members' ability to function as free and equal. Finally, I provide some groundwork for future research on egalitarian nonmonogamy.

Before beginning, I make a few clarifications on the key terms and scope of this paper. The terms *inequality* and *asymmetry* are used interchangeably. For this reason, equality and inequality are largely assumed to be morally neutral. A fundamental idea of this paper is that not all inequalities in nonmonogamy are *unjust*. Only unjust or *unfair* inequalities are morally problematic. In a similar vein, not all kinds of equality are morally significant. For the term *egalitarian*, I interpret that certain authors may use the term to mean *just* or morally significant equality, which aligns with my usage of the term as well. See, for example, Calhoun (2005), Barry (2011), Klesse (2014), and Watson (2022).

The scope of this paper is within individual practices and attitudes, rather than the institutional or legislative aspects of nonmonogamy. That is, this paper examines how the members of a given relationship may treat one another equally, rather than how they stand as equals within a given society. Nonetheless, I also acknowledge how individual practices are largely influenced by political and legislative factors. Additionally, this paper does not aim to argue whether nonmonogamy is morally preferable to monogamy, or other models of relationships. Rather, the aim is to establish how a nonmonogamous relationship can be morally preferable to other nonmonogamous relationships, *ceteris paribus*, with regards to its commitment to equality.

Lastly, this paper can only address the equality prong of ethical nonmonogamy. The comprehensive account of ethical nonmonogamy requires much deeper investigation into various other factors of relationships. These factors include, for example, consent, harm, honesty, and so forth. Thus, the colloquial usage of *ethical nonmonogamy*—especially when used as a synonym for *polyamory*—seems to be a misnomer, and I discourage its use.

NONMONOGAMY, POLYGAMY, AND TRADITIONAL POLYGAMY

Traditional polygamy is a subset of polygamy, whereas polygamy is a subset of nonmonogamy. Nonmonogamy is a broad term for a certain configuration of relationships. The qualifier, monogamous/nonmonogamous, applies to three relationship aspects: romantic, sexual, and marital aspects. A monogamous relationship can be understood as exclusive and dyadic (Jenkins, 2015). That is, it is not open to additional members and involves exactly two parties with regards to the three mentioned aspects.

Beyond the idea of monogamy and nonmonogamy as relationship types, monogamy can also refer to a set of norms, commitments, and beliefs within a given relationship. Monogamy can also be understood in terms of sexual and romantic commitment or faithfulness to one person (Overall, 1998). According to this explanation, monogamy does not only describe the state of a relationship, but also the commitments that people make within that relationship. Moreover, monogamy can also refer to a set of beliefs or norms which people have towards their relationships. Weaver and Woollard (2008) stated that monogamy refers to a norm that “requires two partners to refrain from some range of sexual activity outside their relationship” (p. 507). In this sense, the central norm of monogamous relationship prohibits certain activities outside the relationship, most notably sexual activities.

The previous norm of the relationship does not necessarily change even when one or both partners fail to follow this norm. In other words, the monogamous norm can remain in place within a monogamous relationship even when one or both partners are actively having affairs. As Clardy (2023) observed, many people still identify as monogamous when they are not in any relationship at all, or even when they are having affairs.

Now that monogamy is defined, the simplest way to understand nonmonogamy is as a rejection of monogamy. Clardy (2023) defined nonmonogamy as the rejection or negation of monogamy, with monogamy constituting the core belief that romantic relationships are dyadic and exclusive. Similarly, Chalmers (2019) identified the openness to one’s partner having multiple relationships at a given time as the essence of nonmonogamy, rather than whether any of the involved partners pursue multiple relationships at the same time. In these senses, monogamy and nonmonogamy are not only about what people do, but also who they are and what they intend to do. In sum, monogamy and nonmonogamy can be tokens of personal identity, relationship style, as well as sets of beliefs and norms.

The emphasis of this paper is on nonmonogamy as a type of relationship, with a particular focus on polygamous families. Polygamy is generally understood as multiple marriages at the same time (Overall, 1998). Considering the interwoven nature of romantic, sexual, and marital relationships, married people usually have romantic and sexual relationships with their spouses. Consequently, polygamy typically involves more than two partners who are romantically, sexually, or both romantically and sexually involved with one another, in addition to being married.

Now I discuss how polygamy is most commonly practised. Most instances of polygamy refer to traditional polygyny in which one man has multiple wives at the same time, with hierarchical and patriarchal structure (Brooks, 2009; Sousa, 2015; Strauss, 2012). Within these traditional polygynous families, traditional gender roles are assumed and expected. Traditional gender roles are, for example, where women are expected to be “mothers, home-makers, and sexual objects” (Strauss, 2012, p. 524). For instance, consider the polygamous practice in the town of Colorado City in Arizona. In this community, women’s primary task was to bear as many children as possible (Coltrane & Collins, 2001). Furthermore, women in this community were subordinate to men, and this subordination persisted even in the way they dressed; women were expected to dress in the style of the 1930s, whereas men wore more modern clothing styles.

The wives in traditional polygyny can be referred to as *peripheral wives* (Calhoun, 2005; Strauss, 2012) or *sibling-wives* (May, 2012). This is because not only do they have peripheral roles to the central husband in the family, but, in some cases, they also have sibling-like

relationships with one another. The distinction between sibling-like or *sororal* and *nonsororal* polygyny is important because the sororal polygyny model can help to facilitate cooperation among wives who are sibling-like, leading to opportunities for them to support each other in childcare and other domestic responsibilities (Chisholm & Burbank, 1991). In some polygamous families, members of the same family all live in the same house (Bao, 2008). In other polygamous families, the wives live separately in their own houses but being in charge of their own respective households, with their husband taking turns visiting them (Calhoun, 2005; Strauss, 2012).

The male-dominant or patriarchal role as shown thus far is a central characteristic of traditional polygamy. This characteristic distinguishes traditional polygamy from polygamy in general, with the latter simply defined as multiple marriages at the same time. In this paper, traditional polygamy refers to instances of polygamy with one central husband and multiple peripheral wives, where the traditional gender roles have been adopted.

It is true that there are also cases of one central wife with multiple peripheral husbands, which can be referred to as polyandry (Strauss, 2012). However, polyandry still often reflects traditional gender roles, and thus is still often hierarchical in a patriarchal way. Put another way, the polyandrous arrangement often places the husbands in a more favorable position within the family. May (2012) observed that in societies where women are subordinated, several husbands may share one wife in much the same way as they might share a servant or a sex worker. In a similar vein, there was a prevalence of polyandry in the Himalayan region, typically involving brothers sharing the same wife (Sigman, 2006). In this region, Sigman observed that this trend correlated with data on how male dominance exists in polyandrous societies, for example, in the form of female infanticide.

Women in polygamy are not always subordinate to men. In contrast to the analysis by May and Sigman presented earlier, some polyandrous communities in the Himalayan region have been matriarchal, rather than patriarchal (Coltrane & Collins, 2001; Darragon, 2021). The concept of *Nüguo*, which existed in Sino-Tibetan Marches, suggests that women remained the heads of their households and had authority over various aspects of life until approximately 1300 years ago (Darragon, 2021). The higher status of women in this region has remained prevalent in recent years, despite some variations in social arrangements among different communities across the region (Coltrane & Collins, 2001; Darragon, 2021). For instance, people in this region who practice Buddhism or Bon, often combined with elements of Animism, tend to view marriage as a personal rather than communal decision (Darragon, 2021). Another example comes from polygamy in West Africa, in which women had a good deal of economic power and were often richer than their husbands (Coltrane & Collins, 2001). However, as mentioned earlier, the majority of polygamous practices involve women being subordinate to men. The next section examines these inequalities in detail.

INEQUALITIES IN NONMONOGAMY: THE CASE OF TRADITIONAL POLYGAMY

This section provides a clearer framework of inequality in nonmonogamy by disambiguating inequalities into different kinds, drawing primarily from traditional polygamy as it is practised. These kinds of inequalities generally include unequal numbers of marriages, unequal marital rights, unequal roles, unequal distribution of benefits and burdens, unequal wealth, unequal control over wealth and the family, and unequal living standards. The reason for focusing on traditional polygamy is because traditional polygamy is widely argued to entail grave and indefensible inequalities. Some authors even argue that polygamy is inherently unequal and therefore inherently objectionable (Barry, 2011; Brooks, 2009; Rickless, 2005). This is due to the gender inequality which exists in how traditional polygamy is practised. Although these

inequalities can be investigated one by one, it is important to acknowledge that these inequalities often lead to one another and mutually reinforce one another.

Gender inequality is not the only relevant form of inequality present in traditional polygamy. Several studies show that at least three types of inequalities can be found from traditional polygamous arrangements: inequality between the wives and husband within the same family, between the wives within the same family, and between polygamous and monogamous wives across different families (e.g., Al-krenawi & Lightman, 2000; Al-Krenawi & Slonim-Nevo, 2008; Ault & Van Gilder, 2016; Fatoye et al., 2004; Özer et al., 2013). Since this paper aims at understanding nonmonogamy as a relationship between romantic, marital, and sexual partners, the first kind of comparison is most relevant here. Indeed, the inequality between the wives and husband is a form of gender inequality.

I now begin with the most salient inequalities which are grounded in the central characteristics of traditional polygamy. In the previous section, I defined traditional polygamy as a marriage with one husband who has several wives. The husband can have multiple wives, whereas his wives can only have one husband. This family setting therefore exhibits marital asymmetry. The husband is involved in several marriages, whereas each of his wives is involved in only one marriage. Inequality manifests not only in the personal dynamics of the relationship but also in its legal dimensions, as marriages encompass distinct marital rights. Marital rights grant the right bearer certain legally protected entitlements and privileges. To mention a few, marital rights include tax benefits, immigration rights, parental rights, property rights, prison and hospital visitation rights, among others.

Since the husband is involved in more marriages than each of his wives, the husband has more rights in an accumulative sense, by having collected the rights from his multiple marriages to several wives. For example, in a traditional polygamous family, each wife has a claim to only a fraction of the husband's wealth after his death. By contrast, the husband is entitled to inheritance from each of his wives once they pass away. In sum, the husband has a higher level of legal protection and more privileges than each of his wives. By contrast, each wife only obtains marital rights from their marriage to the one husband.

Having addressed the inequalities stemming from unequal number of marriages, I now consider other core characteristics of traditional polygamy: its hierarchical structure and traditional gender roles. These roles reflect various aspects of gender inequality generally. The first significant aspect of gender inequality is the unequal distribution of demanding and time-consuming responsibilities. For instance, women are often expected to carry the physical and emotional responsibilities of childbearing: a task which takes several months during which they are unable to have more children. In contrast, the husband may direct his attention towards other wives during this time (Brooks, 2009; Strauss, 2012). Presumably, the purpose of this diverted attention is to have more children with the other wives.

The unequal distribution of benefits is also evident in other aspects of traditional gender roles. In traditional polygamy, women are often expected to undertake specific roles, even when such roles are not constrained by their biological faculties. For instance, women are far more likely to take up more of the labour-intensive parts of marriages such as household responsibilities (Ault & Van Gilder, 2016). Further empirical studies on this matter highlight relevant findings.

For instance, a study conducted at a Bedouin-Arab village in Negev, Israel, provides insights into the work patterns of women in these communities. This study focused on comparing polygamous and monogamous families in their attainment of waged work (Al-krenawi & Lightman, 2000). In this study, none of the women in the compared families—polygamous or monogamous—worked outside of the home at all. Similarly, women in some Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints communities were not allowed to work outside the home (Duncan, 2008). Similarly, again, Özer et al.'s (2013) study in Kahramanmaraş in Turkey shows that only 18.6% of senior wives and 36.1% of junior wives

in polygamy worked outside of the home (with senior wives being those who married the husband first). Among monogamous wives, 28.8% of them worked outside of the home. Özer et al. concluded that there was no statistically significant difference in the level of work between monogamous and polygamous wives.

The findings of these studies do not directly investigate gender inequality as a distinct phenomenon. The focus of these studies is on comparing the waged work patterns between polygamous and monogamous women, rather than between women and men. The data reveal slight differences in the amount of work performed outside the home by monogamous and polygamous women; however, these differences are found not to be statistically significant. Although the conclusions drawn from these studies may not explicitly indicate gender inequality, the underlying factors these studies examine do reflect gender inequality. Specifically, these studies show that husbands typically serve as the primary breadwinners. From these studies, it can be inferred that inequality in wealth attainment is more closely tied to gender roles and the hierarchical structure of the family, rather than the monogamous or polygamous nature of the marriages.

Since women are usually expected to undertake housework, they naturally do not have much time and resources to seek waged work. According to Duncan's (2008) study in Mormon polygamous communities in the United States, the women in these communities—in fact—lacked the education or ability to work outside the home altogether. Accordingly, the men remained the main or the only breadwinners. Overall, the effects this situation has on the wives are long-term, as it leaves them less able to compete in the job market. As Okin (1991) suggested, time spent on family and housework often goes unrecognized by potential employers, limiting women's future employment opportunities.

Housework in one's own home does not usually generate income or wealth, whereas waged work does. Accordingly, the breadwinner then has to allocate his income to support his wives' costs of living. This exacerbates inequality in wealth even more. Each wife ends up with a considerably smaller personal allowance than the husband. In many cases, the wives are not even entitled to a personal allowance. I now present two cases which illustrate this point.

Although there are instances where wives are able to secure waged work, income inequalities persist. In some Mormon polygamous families, wives who had waged work were required to hand over their earnings to their husband, who then redistributed the earnings to his wives and children (D'Onofrio, 2005). Consider also a similar case in a polygynous family in Thailand, in which Teko and his seven wives lived and worked together in a family business (Bao, 2008). Teko said:

“My wives can ask for money from me, when they or their children need money. I give money according to the need. I do not give my wives pocket money.” When his second wife won 800,000 baht [about US\$32,000] in the lottery, it was Teko who collected her winnings because “she used family money to buy the lottery ticket.” (Bao, 2008, p. 156).

In both cases, even when the wives earned an income, their husbands retained sole control over it. Consequently, the wives had less wealth and less control over wealth than their respective husbands did.

Besides financial decisions, several authors argue that the central husband has higher control over the family overall (Baltzly, 2012; Duncan, 2008; May, 2012; Strauss, 2012). Strauss (2012), for example, observed that a traditional polygamous family consists of several subfamilies, all of which the central husband is a part of. This family structure gives him at least some level of control over each subfamily, as well as the family system as a whole.

Another significant aspect of familial decision-making that highlights unequal control between wives and husband in a traditional polygamous family is the process of forming and

dissolving the family itself. Critics of polygamy argue that wives typically have little to no say in disputing the addition of new wives; they also lack the ability to divorce other wives if they wish to do so (Barry, 2011; Brooks, 2009). In contrast, the central husband can decide to divorce any of his wives or even all of them.

Before I examine other kinds of inequalities, I consider certain historical practices which may help to explain the husband's control over his wives. In the past, marriage used to be a form of sexual possession between a man and a woman (Coltrane & Collins, 2001). However, this right to sexual possession was not symmetrical across all societies. Historically, men have held this right over their wives, a concept that Coltrane and Collins (2001) describe as "unilateral sexual possession" (p. 47–48). For example, in medieval Arab society, women were considered sexual possessions of men to the extent that women were kept in secluded harems. By contrast, polygyny in Madagascar presented an exception to this asymmetry. In Madagascar in 1936, if a man spent too much time with a particular wife, his other wives could deem it adultery, signifying that women held some degree of sexual possession over their husband within the family system (Coltrane & Collins, 2001). However, it remains true, both then and now, that men in traditional polygamy generally have more control and more rights than their wives, as I have elaborated thus far in this section.

I emphasize that the concept of sexual possession presented here is no longer accurate. First, same-sex marriage has since been legalized in many countries, so marriage is no longer limited to a union between a man and a woman. Second, at the time of their writing, Coltrane and Collins (2001) noted that in most states, spousal rape was not recognized as a crime. Now, in many societies today, spousal rape is a criminal offense. Additionally, there is a growing recognition of asexual relationships and sexless marriages. See, for example, Brunning and McKeever's (2021) work on asexuality.

Now, I consider further studies which highlight the final kind of inequality I discuss in this paper. It is often argued that wives in traditional polygamy have lower living standards, not only than their husbands, but also than their monogamous counterparts. In comparison to their monogamous counterparts, some studies reveal that polygamous wives experience higher levels of domestic violence, sexual abuse, and lower marital satisfaction (Strauss, 2012; Watson, 2022). Fatoye et al.'s (2004) study showed that women in polygamous families in their study reported higher mean scores for anxiety and depression (52.82 and 42.86 respectively) in comparison to their monogamous counterparts (25.40 and 24.06). These outcomes were attributed to lower levels of spousal support and intimacy from the central husband.

To understand unequal health and living standards in traditional polygamy further, a systematic review is an appropriate source of empirical data. One such systematic review was conducted by Shepard (2013), who examined 22 empirical studies on mental health of polygamous wives. The review suggested that, generally, polygamous wives had a higher risk of mental health issues compared to monogamous wives. In one of these studies, polygamous wives were three times more likely than monogamous wives to be distressed (Abbo et al., 2008; Shepard, 2013).

Some of these studies also compared the levels of well-being among wives within the same family. Shepard's (2013) findings suggest that the well-being of senior wives was generally worse than that of junior wives. Three studies set in Cameroon, Malawi, and Turkey showed that younger senior wives experienced significantly less marital satisfaction, and significantly higher somatoform disorder (Shepard, 2013). Similarly, Ault and Van Gilder's (2016) study—set in the United States—also shows that some senior wives endured more labour-intensive tasks than the junior wives. In one case, Lena, a senior wife, continued to take on household responsibilities for many years when her sister-wife was focusing on education.

By contrast, Bao's (2008) study in Thailand shows that senior wives often had more privileges and authority than junior wives. For example, in one case, the senior wife expected a junior wife to show respect to her during a wedding ceremony, as well as in their everyday lives.

It is important to note that Teko—the central husband—was only legally married to his first wife, as the legal recognition of polygyny was abolished in Thailand in 1935. However, he entered into customary marriages and held wedding ceremonies with his other wives. Accordingly, only Teko's first wife was recognized by law, granting her a higher status in accordance with the law.

Before moving on, I present some legal and cultural framework to polygamy in Thailand. Although polygamy is illegal in most of Thailand including Bangkok, it is legal in four southern provinces—Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and Satun—in which Islamic family law is implemented (Samah et al., 2017). In Bangkok, Bao (2008) suggested that polygamy was heavily influenced by the political economy and identity politics, particularly the cultural perception of masculine identity which combines elements of Thai-style *womanizer* (*chaochu*, in Thai) and Chinese–Thai family-business mindset. Bao (2008) further highlighted that polygynous practices as such were prevalent among second-generation Chinese–Thai family businesses where home, marriage, sex, businesses, and money were intertwined.

Meanwhile, in the four southern provinces, the adoption of Islam can be traced back to the late 15th century, with the influence of Muslim traders and the gradual establishment of Islamic law in the region (Samah et al., 2017). This long history of Muslim cultural and religious traditions lead to various legal changes in Thailand until the official recognition of Islamic courts and family law in the southern region in 1946 (Samah et al., 2017). This historical framework explains the differing political and cultural landscapes of polygamy in different parts of Thailand.

The health, cultural, and economic data are important as they show that there are certain inequalities in traditional polygamy that go beyond the gender inequalities. Another important question here arises: are these inequalities due to the asymmetry in the number of spouses? Put another way, is this because one husband has multiple wives, or because multiple wives share one husband within a given family setting? In the next section, I argue that there are more direct factors contributing to inequalities that warrant greater focus. For now, I conclude that the empirical studies presented here do not definitely show that, in general, polygamous wives are worse off than monogamous wives, or that senior wives are worse off than junior wives, or vice versa.

ARE THESE INEQUALITIES TO DO WITH THE ASYMMETRY?

In this section, I identify the more direct sources of these inequalities as oppression against women, lack of education, restricted property rights, poverty, and hierarchical power dynamics. I argue that these factors do not necessarily stem from the presence of plural marriages. Put another way, the asymmetry in the number of spouses has little bearing on these larger worries.

I begin by considering a potential objection to my view put forth by Brooks (2009), who is a prominent critic of polygamy in all its forms. Brooks argued that although polyamory can be more egalitarian, there is no evidence that it is less likely to lead to polygyny. However, Brooks did not present any evidence that polyamory leads to polygyny or traditional polygamy either. Brooks also overlooked the large body of studies which show that polyamorists deliberately object to the gender structure present in traditional polygamy, and that polyamory generally exists outside the framework of traditional polygamy altogether. For further arguments on how polyamory can be distinguished from the inegalitarian practices of traditional polygamy, see Black (2006). Similar to Brooks, Rickless (2005) argued that polygamy is problematic insofar as there is an asymmetry in the number of spouses, resulting in an asymmetry in spousal support. Like Brooks's, Rickless's argument is also largely unproven. I intend to argue in more detail in future work that many forms of support within families are not simply calculated, divided, and then redistributed among spouses. Moreover, in collaborative nonmonogamous

settings, providing emotional support for and engaging in emotional work with multiple partners can be beneficial rather than detrimental (e.g., Brake, 2022; Brunning, 2016; Weaver & Woollard, 2008).

The data on health challenges experienced by polygamous women forms part of Brooks's (2009) argument and conclusion that polygamy is inherently unequal no matter what form it takes. Brooks drew on studies of emotional distress among women in Nigeria (Fatoye et al., 2004), in Lalitpur district in Nepal (Ho-Yen et al., 2007), and Bedouin-Arab women (Al-Krenawi & Slonim-Nevo, 2008). All three studies indicate that polygamy tends to correlate with several mental health issues such as lower self-esteem, higher depression, and higher anxiety.

However, these three studies do not specifically address the relationship between polygamy and health. Both Fatoye et al.'s (2004) and Ho-Yen et al.'s (2007) studies focused on the connection between pregnancy and emotional distress, rather than on the connection between polygamy and emotional distress. Fatoye et al. highlighted several factors that contributed to health challenges among women, including polygamous family structure, previous abortions, and the processes of giving birth. Similarly, Ho-yen et al.'s study identified polygamy as one among several other risk factors such as alcohol use disorder and prior depression. Both of these studies highlighted the importance of considering multiple factors when addressing health challenges of women who are pregnant or have given birth.

Finally, Al-Krenawi and Slonim-Nevo (2008) identified similar risk factors, such as polygamous family structure and economic hardships, as contributors to health challenges experienced by women. Their study found that polygamous families in their sample faced more economic hardships than monogamous families. Importantly, Al-Krenawi and Slonim-Nevo concluded that polygamy is an integral part of life in the Bedouin-Arab community, and recommended finding ways to support polygamous families in addressing their challenges, rather than disregarding the polygamous lifestyle. In sum, these three studies presented by Brooks indicate much more nuance concerning the causes and effects of the relevant inequalities and health challenges in traditional polygamy.

Beyond Brooks's argument, there are factors outside the marriage structure which contribute to these inequalities. I revisit the systematic review by Shepard (2013) presented in the previous section. Shepard concluded that the best predictor of mental health issues in women seems to be other variables such as the lack of education and family functioning, rather than the marital status itself. According to Shepard, the overall research suggests mixed findings regarding the well-being and mental health outcomes among different categories of wives in polygamous marriages. These findings thus do not support the conclusion that polygamy—as a form of marriage—can be held responsible for women's lower living standards.

To identify the more direct sources of inequalities in traditional polygamy, evidence points towards traditional gender roles which give men a higher status than women. For instance, Sigman (2006) argued that oppression against women is often due to women's limited property rights, which may be facilitated through polygamy, but not necessarily so. As I stated in the beginning of this paper, these inequalities mutually reinforce one another. The causes and effects of the women's inability to marry multiple people, coercion, and similar factors are difficult to discern (Strauss, 2012). This is because polygamy is often associated with patriarchal practices, significant poverty, and hierarchical power relations.

As I discussed in the previous section, the wives' lack of agency in deciding which other wives enter or exit the group marriage does render them unequal to their husband. The central husband holds significantly more power than each of his wives in this context. However, this situation does not necessarily imply inequality among the wives themselves. It could be argued that the wives' legal inability to divorce one another ensures equal protection against being removed from the family (May, 2012). If wives had the ability to divorce one another, this could also suggest that each wife's right to remain in the marriage is not entirely her own. If this were the case, then the wife's right to stay in the marriage would be contingent upon not being

expelled by the other wives. Accordingly, what appears to be inequality can be a form of equal protection. As May argued, protection from the power of other wives is often more important for each wife's self-determination than if they were to have power over one another.

It is important to reiterate that the wives have equal right and protection only in relation to one another. Wives have far fewer rights and less protection than their husband, resulting in the unequal power dynamics between the wives and the husband. Moreover, power dynamics as such are not always apparent. Power can be latent or even invisible in otherwise symmetrical monogamous marriages. Consider Komter's (1989) study on how power manifests itself in marital conflicts and decision-making. The absence of apparent conflict between spouses does not necessarily indicate satisfaction with the power dynamics within the marriage, nor does it imply power symmetry. Among the families in Komter's study, one factor that contributed to the absence of apparent conflict was that wives tended to anticipate their husbands' negative responses to discussions about changes, prompting the wives to avoid raising their desires for change or to express them in very indirect ways.

The possibility of conflicts arising when the more subordinate family member expresses their desires is a reflection of unequal power dynamics within the family, particularly power in its latent form (Komter, 1989). Understanding these unequal dynamics calls for close attention to family functioning, which is influenced by various, often less visible, factors. This perspective supports the argument that larger inequalities within polygamous families may stem less from the asymmetry in the number of marriages and more from the asymmetry of power between women and men.

Turning now to the issue of power over marital resources, unequal power over resources can exist even when those resources are distributed equally. For instance, Ault and Van Gilder (2016) observed that polygamous wives usually negotiate and divide household tasks among themselves, whereas the husband facilitates the negotiations of these responsibilities. In this sense, the wives in a given family may end up with equal housework in comparison to one another, and they do have some control over how the housework is distributed. However, it is still the husband who is regarded as the "family manager" (Ault & Van Gilder, 2016, p. 566) and has the final say in cases of conflict.

Another related example came from monogamous households in the United States. Even when income was divided equally between the two spouses, and the spouses shared similar living standards, the breadwinner often remained in a position of power to determine how the income was spent (Okin, 1991). Similarly, in nonmonogamous households in the United States, the partner with greater resources tended to have more influence over how related issues are resolved (Klesse, 2007). Klesse conducted interviews with nonmonogamous families of gay and bisexual men, which reveal that a respondent who could not contribute to the mortgage felt more like a guest than a family member, and that important financial decisions were made by those who had the financial resources. These studies illustrate how economic disparity, even within seemingly egalitarian families, can place the family members in unequal positions.

The upshot of this section is that inequalities can exist in nontraditional marriages, monogamous marriages, and marriages without gender roles. Moreover, in matriarchal polyandrous societies as I have discussed, it is possible that the power dynamics in this family system place men in unfavorable positions within their families. Thus, it is plausible that problematic inequalities also exist within these families, or other family structures, too.

I conclude that polygamy—as a form of marriage—should not be regarded as the main cause of problematic inequalities. As May (2012) argued, for a practice to be inherently objectionable, the objection to the practice should be directed to at least one of its intrinsic characteristics. In nonmonogamy generally, there is no clear causal link between the presence of multiple sexual, romantic, or marital partners itself and the inequalities observed in traditional polygamy. Brooks's objections to nonmonogamy were based on traditional polygamy within the

context of broader life challenges, and therefore, these objections do not work as objections to polygamy as a form of family structure.

WHY ARE THESE INEQUALITIES UNJUST?

Although I have argued that the inequalities previously presented are not direct results of multiple marriages themselves, I still maintain that these inequalities are unjust. The central reason is that people who are subject to these inequalities are not sufficiently respected as *free and equal*. There are different ways of conceiving what it means to be free and equal. I examine three conceptions of justice, broadly construed as Rawls's (1971/1999) principle of basic liberties, the presence of subtler injustices within families, and luck egalitarianism.

The first way to conceive of people as free and equal is grounded in the notion of equal basic liberties. It is generally conceived that basic liberties cannot be sacrificed or traded off for the sake of other liberties or other principles of justice. This conception is supported by Rawls's theory of justice, as well as the concept of fundamental human rights.

In Rawls's *A theory of justice* (1971/1999), the first principle reads "each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all" (p. 220). Rawls's first principle of justice ensures the basic rights and liberties of all people in a just society, as those rights and liberties would enable people to be free and equal. The basic liberties in this context include freedom of thought, freedom from psychological and physical oppression, the right to hold personal property, and the like. Among Rawls's several principles of justice, his first principle is the lexically prior principle, which means that it has to be satisfied in a society before the other principles. This idea reinforces the importance of equal basic liberties, and that these liberties cannot be traded off or given away.

The idea of inalienability of basic liberties is also conceived within the concept of human rights. For human rights to be inalienable means the right bearers cannot lose the rights or voluntarily give it up (Nickel, 2021). Basic human rights include—according to the UN, 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights—the right to life and safety (Article 3), the right to marry and to start a family (Article 16), the right to own property in (Article 17), and freedom of thought and expression in (Article 19).

In traditional polygamy, there are significant inequalities in basic rights and liberties as such. As I have observed throughout this paper, one key characteristic of traditional polygamy is that women are prevented from determining their own lifestyles as freely as men are able to. This characteristic shows that there is an inequality in freedom of thought between men and women. Moreover, freedom of thought can also be considered in conjunction with freedom from psychological oppression. There is strong evidence that women in these families suffer from different forms of psychological oppression. This is reflected in the data I presented previously, which shows that women in traditional polygamy often suffer from mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and lower self-esteem.

Another important basic liberty is the right to property. The equal right to hold property does not imply that everyone ought to possess equal amounts of property. Rather, the concept of equal property rights is based on the idea that everyone is equally entitled to personal possessions, and that "no one may be deprived of his or her possessions" (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2007). In the previous section, I explored how even when spouses in a given family have equal property or equal legal rights to property, the more subordinate spouses may still face challenges in exercising equal control over their own property.

In traditional polygamy, although some women may theoretically possess property rights, their personal agency in exercising control over property is significantly limited. Although wives may have legal ownership over some personal property, their ownership is not free from interference. I explained previously that some women give away the control over income to their

husbands. Generally, the husband primarily exercises property rights and makes decisions regarding family property. This situation contradicts the underlying principle of property right: that everyone may not be deprived of their possessions. It raises concerns about genuine property rights for women, as they are often seen as mere beneficiaries of their husband's property rather than having full ownership themselves.

Although the conception of equal basic liberties is a primarily Rawlsian conception of justice, equality of basic liberties has a wide applicability. Its applicability is reflected in the adoption of human rights for all human beings. Furthermore, I argue that unjust inequalities are rooted not only in the threat to basic liberties, but also in subtler forms of inequality, as illustrated by the concepts of latent and hidden power. Intense unequal power dynamics can persist, as individuals are particularly vulnerable within families and intimate relationships.

I suspect that Rawls might disagree with this conception of justice. According to Rawls (1971/1999), when the hypothetical people choose appropriate principles of justice from the original position, family members are represented by the "heads of families" (p. 111), whom Rawls assumed would act in the interests of their family members. However, contrary to Rawls's view, substantial evidence suggests that injustices are perpetuated within family units, as discussed throughout this paper. Okin (1991) directly challenged the application of Rawls's theory in this context, leading to further debates between Okin (2004, 2005) and Rawls (1997) himself. I now examine this exchange.

Okin (1991) argued that focusing only on the heads of the families leaves women and children underrepresented, especially given that the subjects in Rawls's theory are assumed to be male throughout. This can create further injustices, for instance, when the head of the family chooses his wife to bear and raise children simply because it would be the most efficient for the family (English, 1977; Okin, 2005). Okin (2005) further argued that this situation is unjust because it denies women fair equality of opportunity.

Rawls (1997) acknowledged Okin's contribution and the fact that women had historically borne an unjust share of household labour, therefore, Rawls granted that gender equality is indeed important. However, Rawls stated that although the principles of political justice apply directly to the family, they do not apply to the internal life of the family that is fully voluntary. Rawls emphasized that for the division of labour within the family to be considered fully voluntary, it must result from the voluntary choices of family members, such as religious beliefs that align with their freedom of religion, rather than being influenced by discriminatory practices or societal pressures.

Rawls's response sparked subsequent further debates, notably Okin's (2004) argument that the families are not entirely voluntary associations. Although Rawls argued that the division of labour within the families in accordance with freedom of religion is voluntary, Okin (2004, 2005) contended that fundamental religious texts frequently perpetuate sexism and domination over women's lives. Similarly, D'Onofrio (2005) discussed how fundamentalist religious beliefs are often rooted in patriarchal structures that dictate strict gender roles. This creates an environment where women are viewed as subordinate to men, reinforcing systemic inequalities such as limited access to education, economic dependency, fear, and coercion.

Across philosophy literature, it has now been well established that the distribution of goods and burdens within families is a matter of justice. Subsequent feminist works have addressed this topic and, in particular, how caregiving relationships should be justly regulated (Brake, 2010, 2014; Chambers, 2017; Gheaus, 2009; Metz, 2010; Toop, 2022; Watson, 2022). The authors cited above proposed different approaches of achieving appropriate state recognition of relationships, with Brake, Chambers, and Watson explicitly suggest the official recognition of various kinds of nonmonogamous relationships. After all, this would promote the fair and equal distribution of the primary goods in caregiving relationships and families.

Gheaus (2009), for instance, similarly argued that the family system perpetuates injustices in many ways. This is because the care that people receive in life is often determined by the care

that they received as children, which depends on the family they were born into. Gheaus noted that families range from very loving to neglectful or even abusive, and so a child's well-being is often a matter of chance based on the child's family. Gheaus thus concluded that the care and family system affect people's choices and opportunities later on in their lives, and therefore, care represents a form of luck which should be the subject matter of the principles of fair distribution as well.

Gheaus' arguments indicate that chance and luck have important roles to play in the realm of justice. This idea is commonly presented in the conception of justice known as *luck egalitarianism*. The rationale behind luck egalitarianism is to prevent individuals from being disadvantaged by factors beyond their control, commonly referred to as *brute luck* (Dworkin, 1981). Brute luck includes, for example, having chance-based attributes like having a certain gender assigned at birth, genetic disabilities, and so forth.

In the context of traditional polygamy, I have highlighted that the wives in this family system receive fewer goods and more burdens than their husbands due to the societal and cultural norms surrounding their pre-assigned sex and gender roles. Gender thus plays a major role in the distribution of goods and burdens in traditional polygamy. Moreover, from the intersectional perspectives, gender is a form of systemic stratification that links to various other inequalities such as unequal access to resources, opportunities, and power within both private and public spheres (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020; Gheaus, 2018). Because of this, luck egalitarians would argue that the unequal distribution of goods and burdens in traditional polygamous families is unjust, as women especially have to suffer the consequences of their brute luck in these families.

Having considered how luck egalitarianism applies to the inequalities in traditional polygamy, I now address some of the criticisms against luck egalitarianism. Anderson (1999) argued against luck egalitarianism on several grounds, including that the theory fosters an attitude of pity rather than respect and concern towards victims of bad brute luck. Luck egalitarianism does this by equalizing suffering rather than alleviating it, and the view also focuses on the gap between those who suffer more and those who suffer less, which evokes the feelings of inferiority and superiority.

Instead, Anderson (1999) conceives of the important kind of equality as equal standing among individuals, rather than equal distribution of specific goods and burdens. The notion of equal standing among individuals also suggests that being excessively dependent or vulnerable in a relationship can be morally problematic. For example, in traditional polygamy, the wives are usually financially dependent on the central husband as the head of the family. For many women, one of the reasons for entering and staying in a traditional polygamous marriage is to guarantee financial stability (Strauss, 2012). This does not imply that being in a traditional polygamous marriage is a desirable choice for the wives, but rather, it may simply be that it is the least undesirable choice among various undesirable choices. In such a situation, the wives' functioning as free and equal persons is undermined.

A way to understand how these subtle inequalities are unjust is that the more vulnerable parties of the relationship are usually at a higher risk of being exploited. Beyond a certain threshold, unequal vulnerabilities become morally problematic. According to Goodin (1986), and Okin (1991), this threshold can be determined by each party's capacity to withdraw from the relationship. It is less likely that one would be exploited, if such a withdrawal does not incur severe costs to the one who withdraws from the relationship. If there is no sensible exit option for the more vulnerable party, this situation seems to reflect insufficient respect for the more vulnerable party as free and equal.

In traditional polygamy, it can even be argued that many wives do not have a choice to exit their marriages at all. Leaving such marriages can be socially, if not also legally, impossible due to the women's vulnerable position (Watson, 2022). For instance, they might not be able to navigate the legal procedures and repercussions of divorce or even be aware that divorce is an

option in the first place. Even worse, there are cases in which wives escaped from traditional polygamy and ended up in dire consequences. Duncan (2008), for example, studied women who escaped from their polygynist marriages only to live in constant fear of detection, with some women being repeatedly recaptured and abused.

Not only do women in traditional polygamy have fewer available choices, but they may also not be aware of the choices they do have. Calhoun (2005) similarly argued that whether gender inequality exists in traditional polygamy also depends on whether the wives have access to sufficient information about their alternatives and other lifestyles. Calhoun did not elaborate on what other lifestyles may be available to wives in traditional polygamy. From the discussions in this paper so far, it seems that wives in traditional polygamy do not have sufficient access to information and other lifestyle choices. In these cases, the wives may view their own preferences as dependent on their husband's preferences, since he is the patriarch of the household. As I noted earlier, basic liberties cannot be relinquished; therefore, the inability to exercise these liberties or even be aware of them is considered unjust.

Having recognized the part that traditional gender roles play in unjust inequalities, I note that unjust inequalities can also exist without gender. Although the prevalence of traditional gender roles seems to be the main contributor to the unjust inequalities of traditional polygamy, overly focusing on this correlation may divert well-deserved attention from the threat to basic liberties itself.

To summarize this section, I have argued that inequalities in traditional polygamy are generally unjust for three main reasons. First, these inequalities threaten basic liberties. Second, subtler forms of inequalities are particularly present in intimate relationships and families. Such dynamics warrants a closer examination of power relations within these relationships, as many forms of subtle inequalities can prevent individuals in these relationships from functioning as free and equal. Third, these inequalities are mainly grounded in personal attributes which occur by sheer chance. It is unjust to distribute goods and burdens on the basis of brute luck including—most notably—the gender assigned at birth. Although there are different philosophical interpretations of what constitutes brute luck and, consequently, genuine choices, it is undeniable that gender assigned at birth is entirely beyond the control of the individual being born. Those who object to luck egalitarianism can thus still agree that inequalities based on sex and gender are unjust.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EGALITARIAN NONMONOGAMY: SOME GROUNDWORK

I have now provided a framework for understanding why the prevalent inequalities in traditional polygamy are unjust. There have already been ongoing discussions surrounding different forms of egalitarian nonmonogamy, notably in the contexts of polyfidelity and polyamory. Although these forms of nonmonogamy address some of the unjust inequalities present in traditional polygamy, I intend to argue on another occasion that there are still strong objections to both of these approaches. In a similar vein, I aim to provide comprehensive arguments on egalitarian nonmonogamy on another occasion. This section provides only a brief overview of my proposal, introducing the main ideas that will be developed further in future work.

I begin with the existing proposals on egalitarian forms of nonmonogamy. Strauss (2012) proposed a polyfidelity model which requires equal marriages within a family arrangement, and therefore equal number of spouses who are all involved with one another. I aim to argue that the structure of polyfidelity still cannot prevent unjust inequalities from occurring within a polyfidelity unit. Spouses cannot obtain equal control over the family simply by having symmetrical direct relationships with each other, by being equally married to each other, or by having an equal number of marital rights. This is because external factors such as cultural norms, societal expectations, financial resources, and personal characteristics can all significantly impact who

has control over the family. I also aim to argue that viewing such an approach as the ultimate solution to inequalities overlooks the nuances of intimate relationships. Intimacy cannot usually be molded into overly specific forms.

The notion of equality in polyamory is less clear. I now briefly consider some possibilities. According to Sheff's (2013) definition, "polyamorous relationships are openly conducted and nonmonogamous, with equal access to multiple partners for women and men" (p. 979). According to a thematic analysis of surveys conducted among polyamorous and monogamous individuals, some survey respondents maintained that individuals who engage in polyamory are supposed to have equal feelings towards their partners (Cardoso et al., 2021). Put another way, polyamorists are expected to love their partners equally.

I argue that polyamory would still face similar objections to polyfidelity. Moreover, unjust inequalities can still exist in polyamory, too. This is because, as Haritaworn et al. (2006) argued, the discourses surrounding polyamory often occur within specific demographics—predominantly white, middle-class, and educated individuals—leading to a limited understanding of the lived experiences of more marginalized individuals. Sheff (2005) herself also suggested that the barrier to accessing polyamory is especially acute among women of color, as illustrated, for example, by the case of Yansa who already felt like her colleagues were uncomfortable with her due to her race, and thus she decided not to openly identify as polyamorous. Similarly, research shows that individuals from marginalized ethnic groups or lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to face stigma if they publicly identify as polyamorous (Clardy, 2024; Klesse, 2014). It seems, then, that less privileged polyamorous individuals do not have equal access to multiple partners in the real world.

The definition offered by Sheff as presented earlier also does not take into account gender identities beyond women and men. Furthermore, women of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds experience other disadvantages such as lower access to quality healthcare as well (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020). Thus, any proposal towards a form of egalitarian nonmonogamy should take into account the lived experiences of marginalized individuals.

Moving away from the precise forms of nonmonogamy, I propose that the important notion of equality in nonmonogamy is not within the form of the relationship itself. Rather, equality is grounded in the way members of the relationship relate to one another. I propose that egalitarian nonmonogamy is grounded in a combination of egalitarian attitudes and egalitarian treatment among individuals within a given relationship setting.

I propose two interrelated kinds of egalitarian attitudes that are most relevant to nonmonogamous relationships: equal respect, and equal recognition of other people's status as free and equal. The notion of equal respect is grounded in the idea that everyone has equal worth simply because everyone is an equal member of the human community (Kelley, 2020). I also rely on the distinction between *recognition* and *appraisal* respect made by Cohen (2012). If someone behaves inappropriately, they may not receive appraisal respect; however, they still retain recognition respect as an equal human being. This distinction is particularly relevant to nonmonogamy, in which there is a potential for a large number of relevant parties, many of whom are only connected to each other via their common partners. For this reason, members of a nonmonogamous network who do not have direct relationships with each other might not know each other well enough to warrant appraisal respect. And precisely because they do not know each other well, they should also refrain from preemptive judgments and prejudices.

In future work, I aim to focus on three kinds of egalitarian treatment that are most relevant to nonmonogamous relationships: avoiding domination and subordination, egalitarian decision-making, and egalitarian division of household labour. For the purpose of this paper, I focus on egalitarian decision-making. Kelley (2020) offers practical approaches to having dialogues within *just relationships*, with relationships being conceived of as moral entities. These approaches are applicable to egalitarian nonmonogamous relationships. Dialogues in just

relationships can be carried out, for instance, by engaging in mindful dialogues with respect and without judgment (Kelley, 2020), creating emotionally safe space for partners, and encouraging equal participation (Kelley, 2017).

Egalitarian decision-making and engaging in mindful dialogues, however, may be more challenging for some than for others, especially in families with power imbalances. As noted earlier, in marital decision-making and conflicts, many wives choose not to voice their desires in the first place. In such cases, subtler power differences can persist and oftentimes go unnoticed by the family members. In any decision-making process, individuals involved need to be mindful of the broader life circumstances that each family member faces. An egalitarian approach here is for the less vulnerable parties to put themselves into others' shoes. For example, financially secure members may seek to understand how financial precarity can influence priorities and increase stress. As Komter (1989) also argued, the unequal nature of marital power can be addressed if the spouses recognize their *stereotyped self-concepts* like traditional gender roles and how they relate to each other, especially the differences in how the spouses view their roles and responsibilities. Finally, decision-making processes should be guided by egalitarian attitudes as well. For example, more financially successful or assertive parties may avoid displaying superiority, and not let their financial contribution determine how much weight their opinions carry in family decisions.

A challenging question presents itself: can women in traditional polygamy adopt my proposals? They might not be able to. I have argued throughout this paper that the women in traditional polygamy often have significantly reduced personal autonomy. For instance, in Southeast Arnhem land, women were not only societally or economically pressured to practise traditional polygamy, but their mothers-in-law and husbands also had the leverage on the women's marital lives (Chisholm & Burbank, 1991). Not only this, there is evidence of Aboriginal men using literal violence in order to obtain or retain a wife (Chisholm & Burbank, 1991). Since participation in traditional polygamy is often not a genuine choice, addressing the inequalities within it cannot be achieved simply by advising women to abandon their family structure or for everyone to cultivate egalitarian attitudes.

Although the choice to participate in polygamy is often a forced choice, some women still gain some benefits from polygamous family structure, such as social support and shared household responsibilities among sibling-wives (Chisholm & Burbank, 1991). Polygamy can also provide them with social status, since polygamy is a highly approved way of life in some cultures (Chisholm & Burbank, 1991). This fact strengthens my argument that women who face different cultural and socioeconomic contexts may not be able or willing to simply choose polyfidelity, polyamory, or any alternative forms of relationships.

That said, I reiterate that the inequalities in traditional polygamy remain unjust. The benefits gained from engaging in an unjust practice do not necessarily justify the practice itself. Moreover, being able to choose the least undesirable option among various undesirable options does not justify the threat to basic liberties either.

Finally, I reiterate that my conception of egalitarian nonmonogamy aims to propose a framework for what an egalitarian relationship looks like, rather than to impose a duty on the society or individuals, or to present the solution to existing inequalities at large. Addressing the problem of existing unjust inequalities likely requires significant societal changes. I hope that my examination of these injustices contributes to shaping future research on what precise changes are needed, as well as how they can be implemented. I acknowledge that there are many constraints in the real world which prevent people from engaging in egalitarian relationships. The understanding and awareness of various ways in which people can be equal and unequal, which I have hopefully shown in this paper, is an important first step.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I clarify and investigate the multifaceted nature of inequality and equality in non-monogamy. By drawing from data on traditional polygamy as it is practised, the prevalent inequalities can be understood as unequal freedom to marry and start families, marital rights—especially property rights, income, control over various aspects of life, as well as living standards. Having distinguished these inequalities, I acknowledge that these inequalities mutually reinforce one another. Importantly, these inequalities are not simply due to the form of marriage itself, but rather other identifiable factors such as oppression against women, economic hardship, and hierarchical power relations. I argue that inequalities in traditional polygamy are generally unjust for three main reasons. First, they threaten basic liberties. Second, the intimate nature of these relationships and families tends to lead to subtler forms of unjust inequalities. Third, these inequalities are based on brute luck which occur by sheer chance. I also note that unjust inequalities can exist without the gender structure, and whether a family is monogamous or nonmonogamous.

Finally, I outline some objections to existing forms of supposedly egalitarian non-monogamy, as well as the groundwork for my future work and other research on the topic. I aim to propose that the important notion of equality in nonmonogamy does not lie within the form of the relationship itself. Rather, equality is grounded in the ways individuals relate to one another, based on a combination of egalitarian attitudes and egalitarian treatment towards one another. These attitudes include, among others, equal recognition, respect, as well as an awareness of the broader life circumstances of all family members. A key principle of egalitarian treatment is to prevent unequal power dynamics and domination, primarily by engaging in egalitarian decision-making processes.

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