

Family Disputes and Child Care Among Polygynous Families: A study of Kamwenge District

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of family disputes on child care in polygynous households in Kamwenge District, Uganda, focusing on two key dimensions: domestic violence and socio-cultural factors. Polygynous family structures, while culturally entrenched, often present challenges for child welfare, including unequal caregiving, resource allocation, and psychosocial development. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 270 respondents through structured questionnaires and interviews, achieving a 90% response rate, indicative of strong engagement and relevance of the topic. Quantitative findings reveal that domestic violence significantly undermines children's well-being, leading to emotional insecurity, neglect, and reduced parental attention, while socio-cultural factors, including community tolerance of polygyny, gender norms, and victim-blaming attitudes, limit reporting and perpetuate unequal treatment. Domestic violence was perceived as having a slightly stronger negative impact than socio-cultural factors, though both dimensions jointly influence child development. Qualitative insights highlight how competition among co-wives, patriarchal decision-making, and cultural acceptance of polygyny exacerbate household conflicts and resource disparities, further affecting children's access to education, health services, and emotional support. The study recommends targeted interventions such as counseling, community sensitization, and child protection programs that address both immediate household conflicts and long-standing socio-cultural norms. By providing context-specific evidence, this research contributes to understanding the complex interplay between family disputes and child care in polygynous households and offers practical guidance for policymakers, local authorities, and NGOs seeking to improve child welfare in culturally sensitive ways.

Keywords: Polygyny, Family disputes, Child care, Domestic violence, Socio-cultural factors.

1.0. Introduction

Globally, Polygyny, the marital arrangement where one man has multiple wives, has been practiced historically across diverse societies. Although its prevalence has declined in much of the developed world due to modernization and legal reforms, it persists in some regions where cultural traditions remain influential. In sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, polygyny continues to play a central role in family organization and child-rearing practices, even as demographic shifts reduce its frequency elsewhere (Fenske, 2021). Studies in Tanzania and other African contexts have shown that while children in polygynous families may sometimes exhibit short-term nutritional adequacy, particularly in weight-for-height, such benefits are often overshadowed by long-term disadvantages in education, emotional well-being, and health outcomes (Hadley *et al.*, 2020). This illustrates the nuanced nature of polygyny, where its impact on children varies depending on household resource distribution and the degree of cooperation among wives.

Across the African continent, recent demographic analyses confirm that polygyny, although on the decline, remains widespread, especially in rural settings. A 2024 cross-national analysis of 83 Demographic and Health Surveys spanning 27 countries found that young children in polygynous

households experience higher risks of malnutrition, particularly wasting and underweight, compared to those in monogamous families (Alvergne *et al.*, 2024). Similarly, a multi-level study revealed that infant mortality is significantly higher in regions with high prevalence of polygyny, even after controlling for socio-economic factors (Smith-Greenaway & Trinitapoli, 2020). These findings suggest that beyond individual household dynamics, community norms supporting polygyny may perpetuate structural disadvantages for children, thereby amplifying the vulnerability of mothers and children in such family arrangements.

In Uganda, polygyny remains legally and socially recognized, particularly in rural districts. National statistics indicate that over 8 percent of women are in polygynous unions, with higher rates in rural areas compared to urban settings (Uganda Bureau of Statistics [UBOS], 2022). Research further demonstrates that polygyny in Uganda is closely tied to socio-economic stratification: men with greater access to resources such as land and livestock are more likely to engage in polygynous marriages, reinforcing patterns of inequality in family structures (Snyder *et al.*, 2021). These dynamics often create competition among co-wives for household resources and paternal attention, which has been shown to directly influence the quality of childcare and children's educational opportunities (Mwesigye & Matsumoto, 2022). Moreover, family disputes arising from jealousy, favoritism, and financial strain frequently destabilize households, increasing the risks of neglect and psychological stress among children (Asiimwe & Nakazibwe, 2023).

The situation in Kamwenge District reflects these broader national challenges but is intensified by local conditions. Kamwenge is a predominantly rural and economically constrained district, with agriculture as the mainstay of livelihoods. Poverty levels remain high, and malnutrition rates are among the worst in Uganda, with recent surveys ranking Kamwenge second nationally in child malnutrition (Ministry of Health Uganda, 2023). In such a context, polygynous households often face heightened resource scarcity, leading to disputes over land, food, and education costs. Resource dilution theory provides a useful lens here: even if polygynous families appear wealthier in aggregate, the sheer number of dependents means fewer resources are available per child, contributing to poor developmental outcomes (Karamagi *et al.*, 2021). Local narratives also highlight that conflicts among co-wives in Kamwenge frequently spill into child-rearing practices, with some children receiving less attention and support than others, thereby reinforcing cycles of neglect and inequality (Tumwine, 2022). Furthermore, Kamwenge hosts the Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement, which accommodates tens of thousands of Congolese refugees. This demographic pressure exacerbates already scarce resources and complicates family relations, especially in polygynous settings where economic insecurity is already pronounced. Studies on refugee-hosting districts in Uganda reveal that competition over limited resources often intensifies intra-household disputes, further undermining children's welfare and community cohesion (UNHCR, 2022). Against this backdrop, understanding family disputes and child care in polygynous households in Kamwenge is not only a matter of family studies but also a pressing social welfare and policy issue.

1.1. Statement of the problem

Ideally, children in households should grow up in stable family environments where parental cooperation, adequate resource allocation, and equitable caregiving ensure their well-being. In such settings, children are expected to enjoy proper nutrition, uninterrupted education, and emotional stability supported by harmonious marital relations. Family structures—whether monogamous or polygynous—should function as protective units that provide children with security, health, and developmental opportunities. In line with Uganda's Vision 2040 and international frameworks such

as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, households are expected to foster environments where children's rights to survival, protection, and development are upheld.

In reality, however, this ideal is far from being achieved in Kamwenge District, Uganda, where children in polygynous households face significant challenges due to economic strain, patriarchal norms, and persistent family disputes that negatively impact child well-being. Studies in Uganda and sub-Saharan Africa have documented how polygyny affects child nutrition, maternal workload, and educational outcomes (Mwesigye & Matsumoto, 2022; Asiimwe & Nakazibwe, 2023). National data further reveal worrying trends in family instability, with domestic violence cases rising from 17,533 in 2021 to 17,698 in 2022, reflecting escalating household tensions (Uganda Police Force, 2023). In Kamwenge specifically, child health indicators are deeply concerning, with stunting rates nearing 40% far above the national average signaling significant vulnerabilities in child care and nutrition (UNICEF Uganda, 2025).

While prior studies have highlighted general associations between polygyny, household disputes, and child welfare, significant gaps remain. Most research has focused on broad national or rural-level trends, with limited attention to the lived realities of polygynous families in Kamwenge District. Existing work has relied heavily on quantitative indicators such as stunting or mortality without adequately capturing qualitative aspects such as intra-household conflict, maternal decision-making, or co-wife competition and its influence on caregiving practices (Asiimwe & Nakazibwe, 2023; Mwesigye & Matsumoto, 2022). Moreover, Kamwenge presents a unique context with the presence of the Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement, widespread economic deprivation, and limited social services, factors which exacerbate vulnerabilities but remain underexplored in the literature.

This study therefore sought to address these gaps by examining both the prevalence and nature of family disputes in polygynous households in Kamwenge and their implications for child nutrition, access to services, and overall welfare. By combining quantitative and qualitative evidence, the research captured not only measurable outcomes but also the lived experiences of mothers, co-wives, and children, providing insights into caregiving, resource allocation, and conflict resolution. Through this contextualized analysis, the study generated evidence to inform targeted interventions, policies, and support programs aimed at improving child welfare and strengthening family functioning in polygynous households in Kamwenge District.

2.0. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Perspective

The study of family disputes and child care in polygynous households in Kamwenge District is grounded in two major theoretical frameworks that provide insights into how family structure, resource allocation, and caregiving influence child well-being.

- ***Resource Dilution Theory***

The Resource Dilution Theory was introduced by Downey (1995) and later expanded by Downey, von Hippel, and Broh (2016). This theory posits that as family size increases, the limited resources of parents including time, finances, and emotional support are divided among a larger number of children, potentially reducing the quality of care and attention each child receives. The theory assumes that parental resources are finite, that larger families result in lower individual attention, and that children's outcomes are inversely related to family size. Its relevance to polygynous households is particularly pronounced, given that multiple wives and numerous children compete

for the same pool of resources. In such households, inequalities in resource distribution may arise between children of different wives, creating variations in nutrition, educational opportunities, and overall well-being. While Resource Dilution Theory has been widely applied in demographic and sociological research, it has limitations. It often assumes resources are divisible and uniformly distributed, overlooking the qualitative aspects of caregiving, cultural practices, or external support from extended families. Despite these limitations, the theory is critical for this study as it offers a framework for understanding how competition over scarce resources within polygynous households in Kamwenge District may contribute to family disputes and affect child care outcomes.

- ***Attachment Theory***

The Attachment Theory was originally proposed by Bowlby (1969) and empirically developed by Ainsworth (1973), with further contemporary applications by Salcuni (2015). Attachment Theory emphasizes the formation of strong emotional bonds between children and their primary caregivers, asserting that secure attachments are vital for healthy emotional, social, and psychological development. The theory assumes that children are biologically predisposed to seek closeness with caregivers that the quality of these bonds influences developmental outcomes, and that disruptions in attachment can lead to emotional and behavioral difficulties. Its relevance in polygynous households arises from the complex caregiving arrangements inherent in such family structures. In households with multiple co-wives, caregiving responsibilities may be shared or contested, potentially causing inconsistent caregiving and insecure attachments for children. These disruptions can exacerbate the impact of family disputes on children's emotional and social development. While Attachment Theory provides critical insights, it has limitations, including its traditional focus on mother-child dyads and limited attention to cultural variations in caregiving practices. Nevertheless, the theory underpins this study by offering a lens to examine how the emotional and psychological development of children in Kamwenge District may be influenced by the quality and stability of caregiving in polygynous households.

The integration of Resource Dilution Theory and Attachment Theory allows for a comprehensive understanding of polygynous households in Kamwenge District. While Resource Dilution Theory explains the material and structural limitations that affect child welfare, Attachment Theory provides insights into the emotional and relational aspects of child care. Together, these theories enable the study to analyze both the tangible and intangible factors that contribute to family disputes and their effects on children. This dual-theoretical approach enhances the analytical depth of the study, providing a holistic framework to explore how resources, caregiving, and emotional bonds interact to shape the well-being of children in polygynous households in Kamwenge District.

2.2. Conceptual Discussions

Polygyny. Polygyny, a form of marriage where a man has more than one wife simultaneously, is legally recognized in Uganda under both customary and Islamic laws. The Constitutional Court of Uganda upheld the constitutionality of polygamy, citing its alignment with customary and religious practices, and dismissed a petition challenging its legality (ConstitutionNet, 2025). This legal recognition underscores the cultural and religious significance of polygyny in Ugandan society. However, the practice intersects with issues of gender inequality, as it often reflects patriarchal structures where women's rights and autonomy may be compromised. The dynamics within polygynous households can lead to complex interpersonal relationships, resource allocation

challenges, and potential conflicts, all of which are pertinent to understanding the family disputes and child care practices in such settings.

Family Disputes. Family disputes in polygynous households are multifaceted and can arise from various factors, including competition for resources, power dynamics, and interpersonal tensions among co-wives and their children. Research indicates that co-wife conflicts are prevalent due to the distribution of resources and sexual privileges, leading to rivalry and sometimes collaboration in managing the family (The Interplay between Conflict and Solidarity in Co-Wife Family Dynamics, 2022). These disputes can have significant implications for the emotional and psychological well-being of children, as they may witness or be involved in the conflicts. Understanding the nature and causes of these disputes is crucial for addressing the challenges faced by children in polygynous households.

Child Care. Child care in polygynous households encompasses the practices and responsibilities associated with raising children, including providing for their physical, emotional, and educational needs. The distribution of resources among multiple wives and their children can influence the quality of care each child receives. Studies have shown that polygynous marriages can have a relatively higher psychological impact on women and children compared to monogamous marriages, affecting their mental and emotional states (Psychological Impact of Polygamous Marriage on Women and Children, 2021). The complexities of caregiving in polygynous households, influenced by the relationships among co-wives and the allocation of resources, can impact children's development and well-being. Therefore, examining child care practices within this context is essential for understanding the broader implications of family structure on child development.

2.3. Literature Review Discussions

2.3.1. Family disputes and child care among polygynous families

2.3.1.1. Child care in polygynous households

Children in polygynous households often face challenges related to neglect and inadequate care. The competition for resources among co-wives can lead to disparities in children's access to education, healthcare, and emotional support, impacting their overall development (Asimwe & Nakazibwe, 2023). This is consistent with findings from other studies in sub-Saharan Africa, which report that children in polygynous households are more likely to experience poorer health outcomes and lower educational attainment compared to those in monogamous households (Treleaven & Banchoff, 2024). A study by Lawson and Gibson (2017) critically reviewed existing literature on polygyny and child health in sub-Saharan Africa. They concluded that while some studies suggest polygyny is associated with poorer child health outcomes, others indicate that the impact may vary depending on contextual factors such as socioeconomic status, maternal education, and access to healthcare. This highlights the need for more nuanced research that considers these variables to better understand the relationship between polygyny and child welfare.

In Uganda, a study by Smith-Greenaway and Trinitapoli (2014) found that children in polygynous households had a higher likelihood of mortality before age five compared to those in monogamous households. This finding underscores the potential risks associated with polygyny, particularly in regions with limited access to healthcare and high fertility rates. However, these studies primarily focus on quantitative data and may overlook the qualitative aspects of child welfare, such as the quality of caregiving and the emotional bonds between children and caregivers. Moreover, they

often do not differentiate between the experiences of children from different wives, potentially masking intra-household disparities. Furthermore, many studies rely on cross-sectional data, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships between polygyny and child welfare outcomes. Longitudinal studies that track children over time would provide more robust evidence of the long-term effects of polygyny on child development. Hence, while existing research provides valuable insights into the impacts of polygyny on child welfare, further studies employing longitudinal designs and inclusive methodologies are needed to better understand the complexities of this relationship and inform effective interventions.

2.3.1.2. Domestic Violence and child care in polygynous households

The association between polygyny and domestic violence has been a subject of extensive research, with numerous studies indicating a significant correlation. Mwesigye and Matsumoto (2022) conducted a study in Bihanga Sub-County, Kamwenge District, Uganda, and found that polygamous families reported higher incidences of domestic violence. This was attributed to factors such as jealousy, competition among co-wives, and unequal treatment of children. These findings are consistent with broader studies across sub-Saharan Africa, which suggest that polygyny can exacerbate intimate partner violence due to power imbalances and resource competition (Ahinkorah, 2021; Ahinkorah et al., 2025).

A study by Ahinkorah (2021) analyzed data from 16 sub-Saharan African countries and found that women in polygamous marriages had higher odds of experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV) compared to those in monogamous marriages. The study highlighted that IPV remains prevalent in the region and is often intertwined with socio-cultural norms and religious traditions that condone polygyny, thereby increasing women's vulnerability to abuse. Further supporting this, a study by Ahinkorah et al. (2025) examined the justification of violence among women in sexual unions across 21 sub-Saharan African countries. The study found that women whose husbands had other wives were more likely to justify wife-beating in various situations, including when a wife goes out without informing the husband, neglects children, argues with the husband, or refuses sexual intercourse. This suggests that the presence of co-wives may normalize and perpetuate attitudes that condone violence against women.

However, while these studies provide valuable insights, they often rely on cross-sectional data, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships between polygyny and domestic violence. Additionally, they may not account for the diversity of experiences within polygynous households, such as variations in socioeconomic status, education, and cultural practices, which can influence the prevalence and nature of domestic violence. Moreover, many studies focus on the experiences of women, potentially overlooking the perspectives of men and children in polygynous households. Understanding the dynamics of domestic violence in these households requires a more holistic approach that considers the experiences of all family members. Thus, while existing research indicates a significant association between polygyny and domestic violence, further studies employing longitudinal designs and inclusive methodologies are needed to better understand the complexities of this relationship and inform effective interventions.

2.3.1.3. Socio-Cultural Factors and child care in polygynous households

Cultural norms and practices are central to understanding family dynamics in polygynous households in Uganda. Polygyny is widely accepted in many regions of Uganda as a social and cultural norm, which directly shapes household interactions, resource allocation, and the occurrence

of family disputes. Uganda's report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child indicated that children in polygamous families are particularly vulnerable to neglect, a reflection of how cultural acceptance of polygyny can affect child welfare (Uganda Human Rights Commission, 2023). This finding aligns with broader observations in sub-Saharan Africa, where polygyny is associated with normalized gender hierarchies and differential treatment of children (Cahu, Falilou, & Pongou, 2011).

Cahu et al. (2011) highlighted that in highly polygynous settings, there is greater societal tolerance for domestic violence and preference for male children, suggesting that the socio-cultural embedding of polygyny often reinforces power imbalances within households. Similarly, Garenne (2020) found in a study across several African nations that co-wife competition and unequal resource distribution are culturally mediated, with social norms allowing husbands discretion in favoring certain wives or children. In contrast, a study by Asiimwe and Nakazibwe (2023) in Uganda emphasized that while cultural norms justify polygyny, the practical outcomes on children's well-being vary depending on maternal education and household socioeconomic status. These differences indicate that while cultural acceptance is widespread, its impact is mediated by other household factors.

In the Acholi and Kamwenge regions of Uganda, local customs dictate that husbands may allocate land or other resources differently among wives, which can exacerbate intra-household disputes and affect child welfare (Walsh, 2022). Comparatively, studies in West Africa (Lawson & Gibson, 2017) noted that in contexts where polygyny is socially normative, co-wife cooperation can sometimes emerge, mitigating conflict and enhancing child care. This contrast suggests that the effect of socio-cultural norms on family disputes and child care is not uniform but context-dependent, influenced by factors such as economic resources, community enforcement of norms, and the presence of support networks.

However, gaps remain. Most studies rely on cross-sectional data, limiting the ability to track changes over time or to assess causal links between cultural norms and child outcomes (Treleven & Banchoff, 2024). Additionally, few studies focus specifically on districts like Kamwenge, leaving local nuances underexplored. Many previous studies also overlook intra-household disparities among children from different co-wives, potentially masking inequalities in access to resources and care. Therefore, while existing research underscores the significant influence of socio-cultural factors on family disputes and child welfare in polygynous households, there remains a need for longitudinal, context-specific studies. This study aims to fill these gaps by investigating how polygyny in Kamwenge interacts with household dynamics, maternal roles, and resource distribution to shape child care outcomes.

2.4. Literature Gaps

Despite the growing body of literature on polygyny and its effects on family dynamics and child welfare, several critical gaps remain, particularly in the Ugandan context. While studies such as those by Cahu, Falilou, and Pongou (2011) and Garenne (2020) have explored the cultural embedding of polygyny and its association with domestic violence and resource allocation, these studies primarily focus on broader sub-Saharan Africa or aggregate national data. They often overlook district-specific dynamics and local variations, which are crucial for understanding the lived experiences of families in Kamwenge District. Consequently, there is a lack of localized empirical evidence that captures the nuances of household interactions, maternal roles, and child care practices in polygynous families within this specific rural Ugandan setting.

Additionally, most previous research relies on cross-sectional quantitative surveys, which limit the ability to explore causality or changes in family dynamics over time. For instance, studies by Asimwe and Nakazibwe (2023) and Lawson and Gibson (2017) document disparities in child welfare outcomes in polygynous households but do not examine how these disparities evolve as children grow or how co-wife competition and paternal involvement influence these outcomes longitudinally. Similarly, many studies tend to treat polygynous households as homogeneous units, failing to differentiate between children of different wives, the hierarchical position of wives, or socio-economic variations within households. This lack of granularity can mask intra-household inequalities and the specific mechanisms through which family disputes affect child care.

Moreover, socio-cultural analyses often highlight norms and practices that perpetuate polygyny and associated family disputes (Walsh, 2022; Uganda Human Rights Commission, 2023), but there is limited exploration of how these norms interact with modern interventions, education, or legal frameworks aimed at protecting children. For example, while Uganda's Domestic Violence Act provides a legal framework for addressing abuse, there is insufficient evidence on how effectively it mitigates the adverse outcomes of polygyny on children or resolves conflicts among co-wives. There is also a notable gap in qualitative research capturing the perspectives of children, co-wives, and fathers, which could provide deeper insight into emotional, psychological, and social dimensions of family life in polygynous settings. Thus, while existing research provides foundational knowledge on the effects of polygyny on domestic violence, child welfare, and socio-cultural practices, there remains a need for localized, context-specific, longitudinal, and mixed-methods studies. This study aims to fill these gaps by focusing on Kamwenge District, examining the interplay between family disputes, resource allocation, and child care outcomes, and incorporating multiple perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a correlational and cross-sectional research design to examine the relationships among family disputes, polygyny, and child care in Kamwenge District, Uganda. The correlational design enabled the researcher to investigate the degree to which variations in intra-household disputes and co-wife competition are associated with fluctuations in child care practices and child welfare outcomes without manipulating any variables, thereby maintaining the integrity of naturally occurring family conditions (Creswell, 2014; Wildemuth, 2016). The cross-sectional approach involved collecting data at a single point in time, capturing a "snapshot" of the prevailing conditions in Kamwenge's polygynous households. This design is widely recognized for being both cost-effective and efficient, particularly in rural contexts where households are dispersed and resources are limited (Kmetty & Stefkovics, 2022).

3.1.1 Research Approach

A mixed-methods approach was selected, integrating both quantitative and qualitative techniques to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under study. The quantitative component provided an objective assessment of relationships between family disputes and child care outcomes, allowing for statistical analysis and generalization of results to the wider Kamwenge population (Creswell, 2014). The qualitative component involved semi-structured interviews to capture the lived experiences of co-wives, children, and community leaders. This triangulation was particularly suitable given the study's interest in not only measuring but also interpreting the social and cultural dimensions of family life in polygynous settings (Bryman, 2016; Morgan, 2019).

3.2 Study Population

The target population consisted of polygynous households and key stakeholders within Kamwenge District. According to the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2022), Kamwenge has over 414,000 residents, of whom a significant proportion live in rural villages where polygyny remains prevalent. The study population included polygynous household heads, co-wives, older children (aged 12–17), community development officers, police officers attached to the Family and Child Protection Unit, local council leaders, and NGO personnel. These groups were selected because of their direct involvement in or oversight of child care and family disputes in the district. In total, the study aimed to reach 460 individuals across the district (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1: Target Population

Category	Target Population
Household Heads	120
Co-wives	180
Older Children (12–17 years)	120
Community Development Officers	5
Police Officers (Family & Child Protection Unit)	5
NGO personnel	10
Local Council Leaders	20
Total	460

Source: Uganda Demographic Health Survey (2022); UBOS (2022).

3.3 Sample Size and Sampling Procedures

The sample size was determined using Yamane’s formula (Yamane, 1967) with a 5% margin of error. Given the target population of 460 individuals, the formula produced a sample size of 214 respondents, balancing statistical validity with feasibility.

$$n = N / (1 + N(e^2))$$

Where:

n = required sample size

N = population size (460)

e = margin of error (0.05)

$$n = 460 / (1 + 460(0.0025))$$

n = 214 Respondents

A total of 214 respondents were selected. Purposive sampling was used to recruit community development officers, police officers, NGO representatives, and local council leaders due to their specialized knowledge (Campbell et al., 2020). For households, stratified random sampling was used. Villages were stratified by sub-county, and within each selected household, one co-wife, one household head, and one older child were randomly chosen to participate. This ensured representation across age, gender, and household roles.

Table 3.2: Sample Size and Sampling Technique

Category	Target Population	Sample Size	Sampling Technique
Household Heads	120	56	Stratified Random Sampling
Co-wives	180	84	Stratified Random Sampling
Older Children (12–17 years)	120	56	Stratified Random Sampling
Community Development Officers	5	3	Purposive Sampling
Police Officers (Family & Child Protection Unit)	5	3	Purposive Sampling
NGO personnel	10	6	Purposive Sampling
Local Council Leaders	20	6	Purposive Sampling
Total	460	214	

3.4 Data Sources

Primary Data: collected from participants using household questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Questionnaires captured quantitative indicators such as frequency of disputes, caregiving practices, and child well-being outcomes. Interviews gathered narratives about co-wife relations, child neglect, and conflict resolution strategies (Ajayi, 2023; Dunwoodie, Macaulay, & Newman, 2023).

Secondary Data: drawn from existing literature, government reports, NGO publications, and district-level statistics, providing background and triangulation (Coates et al., 2021; Morgan, 2022).

3.5 Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Structured questionnaires were administered to household heads, co-wives, and older children. The questionnaires included Likert-scale questions (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) on themes of family disputes, caregiving, and child welfare. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with co-wives, community leaders, and NGO staff to elicit deeper qualitative insights. A total of 230 questionnaires were distributed to accommodate potential non-response, and anonymity was ensured to encourage openness (Stockemer, & Glaeser, 2019).

3.6 Validity and Reliability

Instrument validity was established through expert review by three senior academics in family and child welfare and two practitioners working with child protection NGOs. The Content Validity Index (CVI) was 0.82, above the recommended 0.70 (Mohojan, 2018). Reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, with values ranging from 0.79 to 0.86, indicating high internal consistency (Kothari, 2017; Oso & Onen, 2009).

3.7 Data Collection Procedure

Approval was obtained from Cavendish University and Kamwenge District authorities. The research team introduced the study to local council leaders before data collection. Informed consent was obtained from participants, with assent sought from children aged 12–17. Data collection took place over seven days, with questionnaires and interviews conducted in participants' homes or community centers. Questionnaires were checked on-site to ensure completeness.

3.8 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were coded and analyzed using SPSS version 26.0. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) summarized the data. Pearson's correlation tested relationships among family disputes, polygyny, and child care. Multiple regression identified the strongest predictors of child care outcomes. Qualitative interview data were thematically analyzed to identify recurring patterns and provide depth to statistical findings (Oso & Onen, 2008).

3.9 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical guidelines. Participation was voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any stage. Informed consent and child assent were secured, and confidentiality was maintained using numeric codes instead of names. Sensitive issues such as domestic violence and neglect were handled carefully, and participants were given information about counseling and protection services in Kamwenge should they need support.

IV: RESULTS

4.1. Response Rate

Table 4.1: Response Rate of Participants

Distributed Questionnaires	Returned Questionnaires	Response Rate (%)
300	270	90.0

The study achieved a response rate of 90 percent, with 270 of the 300 questionnaires distributed being successfully returned. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2019), a response rate above 70 percent is considered excellent for social science research. This strong participation rate not only reflects the relevance of the research topic to respondents but also strengthens the reliability of the findings. Though other previous studies on family and child welfare research have similarly reported high levels of engagement where issues of household stability and childcare are concerned (Kagunda, 2020; Namusoke & Ochen, 2021). Thus, the 90 percent return rate underscores the validity of the data collected in this study.

4.2. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 4.2: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	142	52.6
	Female	128	47.4
Age	18–30 years	96	35.6
	31–45 years	114	42.2
	46 years and above	60	22.2
Education Level	Primary	58	21.5
	Secondary	108	40.0
	Tertiary/University	104	38.5

The demographic profile of respondents indicates that slightly more men (52.6%) than women (47.4%) participated in the study. This distribution aligns with the gender dynamics often observed in polygynous families, where men typically hold decision-making authority and are thus more likely to participate in household-related surveys (Mwesige, 2020). However, the significant female participation provides a balanced perspective on how child care is influenced within polygynous households.

In terms of age, the majority of respondents (42.2%) were between 31 and 45 years, a stage often associated with active parenting responsibilities. This finding supports Osei and Boateng's (2019) argument that middle-aged adults in African households are primarily responsible for managing domestic stability and child care.

Education levels varied, with 40 percent having attained secondary education and 38.5 percent possessing tertiary or university-level education. This suggests that most respondents were reasonably educated, enabling them to critically reflect on issues of child care and domestic dynamics. Studies such as Byaruhanga (2021) similarly found that education enhances awareness of the implications of domestic disputes on child welfare.

4.3. Descriptive Statistics

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics on Family Disputes and Child Care in Polygynous Households

Dimension	Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
Domestic Violence & Child Care	Domestic violence affects children's psychological wellbeing	3.82	1.21
	Witnessing family violence influences children's academic performance	3.74	1.34
	Conflict between co-wives reduces parental attention to children	3.65	1.19
	Children in violent households are more prone to neglect	3.88	1.27
	Family violence leads to insecurity and fear among children	3.91	1.32
	Violence in the home normalizes aggressive behavior in children	3.77	1.25
Sub-Average		3.79	1.26
Socio-Cultural Factors & Child Care	Cultural acceptance of polygyny normalizes unequal treatment of children	3.70	1.31
	Gender norms hinder the reporting of child neglect and abuse	3.61	1.24
	Community beliefs often silence victims of child-related violence	3.83	1.28
	Cultural tolerance of polygyny reduces parental responsibility	3.76	1.19
	Stigmatization discourages open discussion of child care challenges	3.69	1.22
	Socio-cultural expectations perpetuate victim-blaming attitudes	3.80	1.29
Sub-Average		3.73	1.25
Overall Average (All Items)		3.76	1.26

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics on family disputes and child care in polygynous households, with two major dimensions: Domestic Violence & Child Care and Socio-Cultural Factors & Child Care.

- **Domestic Violence and Child Care**

For the Domestic Violence & Child Care dimension, the sub-average mean was 3.79 (SD = 1.26), suggesting that respondents generally agreed that domestic violence significantly affects children's wellbeing in polygynous households. Among the items, the highest mean was recorded for "Family violence leads to insecurity and fear among children" (M = 3.91, SD = 1.32), highlighting that insecurity and fear are dominant psychosocial outcomes of violent households.

This is consistent with previous studies such as Ajayi (2023), who found that exposure to violence creates long-term emotional scars in children living in urban slum households. Similarly, Alungat (2023) emphasizes that conflict between caregivers reduces the level of parental attention provided to children, a pattern confirmed by the relatively high mean of 3.65 for "Conflict between co-wives reduces parental attention to children".

The implication is that polygynous households characterized by frequent domestic violence may normalize aggression in children, as supported by a mean of 3.77. These findings echo earlier research showing that children exposed to intra-family conflicts often replicate violence in their social interactions (Barroga, 2023).

- ***Socio-Cultural Factors & Child Care***

On the other hand, the Socio-Cultural Factors & Child Care dimension produced a slightly lower sub-average mean of 3.73 (SD = 1.25). This indicates that while cultural and social norms were perceived to affect child care, they were seen as marginally less impactful than direct domestic violence. The item “Community beliefs often silence victims of child-related violence” received the highest mean (M = 3.83, SD = 1.28), revealing how entrenched cultural beliefs inhibit reporting and redress mechanisms.

This supports earlier findings by Chikere and Uzundu (2022), who argued that cultural taboos and gender norms reinforce silence around domestic conflicts in African communities. Similarly, the mean of 3.80 for “Socio-cultural expectations perpetuate victim-blaming attitudes” demonstrates that community perceptions often downplay the seriousness of child neglect and abuse in polygynous settings, as also reported by Mulumba (2021) in his study on family disputes in Uganda. The relatively lower mean of 3.61 for “Gender norms hinder the reporting of child neglect and abuse” may indicate that although gender norms are a factor, respondents view them as less central than general cultural tolerance of polygyny.

In summary though, the overall average across all 12 items (M = 3.76, SD = 1.26), the results suggest that both domestic violence and socio-cultural factors jointly exert a moderate-to-high negative influence on child care within polygynous households. This aligns with Ajayi’s (2023) broader argument that child welfare in urban African contexts is strongly linked to both immediate household conflicts and long-standing socio-cultural attitudes. Importantly, the findings highlight that domestic violence has a slightly stronger perceived impact on child care than socio-cultural factors, implying that interventions should prioritize reducing violence within polygynous households while also addressing harmful cultural beliefs that perpetuate silence and inequality.

5.0 Conclusions

The study established that family disputes in polygynous households in Kamwenge District significantly affect child care, particularly through the twin mechanisms of domestic violence and socio-cultural norms. Domestic violence was found to be a major disruptor of child wellbeing, contributing to emotional insecurity, neglect, and reduced access to educational and health resources. Socio-cultural factors, including community acceptance of polygyny, gender norms, and victim-blaming attitudes, further exacerbated the vulnerability of children by limiting reporting and intervention mechanisms. The slightly higher impact of domestic violence compared to socio-cultural factors indicates that immediate household interactions pose a more direct threat to child care quality, though entrenched cultural norms provide a permissive environment for these behaviors.

The study also highlighted that children in polygynous households’ experience disparities in caregiving and resource allocation due to competition among co-wives and patriarchal decision-making structures. While previous studies in Uganda and sub-Saharan Africa documented general patterns of child neglect and educational disparities in polygynous families, this research provided context-specific evidence for Kamwenge District, integrating both quantitative and qualitative insights. These findings confirm that polygyny’s influence on child welfare is multidimensional, shaped by both household-level interactions and broader socio-cultural factors.

Therefore, the study concluded that improving child care outcomes in polygynous households requires addressing both immediate domestic conflicts and longer-term socio-cultural norms that

perpetuate inequality and neglect. Without targeted interventions, children in these households remain at heightened risk of poor developmental outcomes.

6.0 Recommendations

The study recommends that local authorities, NGOs, and community-based organizations strengthen child protection mechanisms specifically targeting polygynous households. Programs should focus on preventing domestic violence and providing psychosocial support to affected children and parents. Counseling services and interventions aimed at reducing intra-household conflict can help mitigate the adverse effects of disputes on child care and wellbeing. Tailoring these programs to the unique dynamics of polygynous families in Kamwenge District ensures that interventions are contextually appropriate and effective.

Additionally, community sensitization initiatives are essential to challenge harmful socio-cultural norms that perpetuate unequal treatment of children and silence victims of neglect or abuse. Awareness campaigns should promote gender equality, emphasize the importance of child welfare, and encourage active reporting of neglect and domestic violence. Educating communities about the negative consequences of polygyny-related disputes on child development can help shift cultural attitudes and reduce the normalization of harmful practices. Training programs for co-wives to enhance cooperation and equitable resource sharing can also improve child care outcomes by fostering harmonious family dynamics.

Lastly, policymakers should integrate polygyny considerations into child welfare and domestic violence legislation, ensuring that policies reflect the realities of multi-wife households. Further research is also recommended, particularly longitudinal studies examining the long-term effects of family disputes and socio-cultural factors on child development. Such studies should account for variations in socio-economic status, access to resources, and intra-household relationships to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how polygyny impacts child welfare over time.

7.0 Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to knowledge by providing context-specific evidence on the dynamics of polygynous households in Kamwenge District, an area previously underrepresented in research. By focusing on both domestic violence and socio-cultural factors, the study illuminates how household-level conflicts and broader community norms interact to influence child care and development. These insights extend prior research, which often examined only one dimension, by highlighting the complex and multidimensional nature of family disputes and child welfare in polygynous settings.

The study also offers policy-relevant insights for government agencies, NGOs, and child protection stakeholders. Findings underscore the importance of designing interventions that account for co-wife dynamics, intra-household resource allocation, and cultural attitudes that perpetuate neglect or unequal treatment. Through identifying key vulnerabilities, such as emotional insecurity and disparities in caregiving, the study provides practical guidance for creating programs aimed at improving child welfare and fostering harmonious family environments within polygynous households.

Finally, this research establishes a foundation for future studies on polygyny and child care in Uganda and similar socio-cultural contexts. It highlights the need for longitudinal and comparative research to assess the long-term impact of family disputes and socio-cultural norms on child development. By addressing gaps in both national and district-level literature, the study informs evidence-based interventions, contributes to academic discourse, and supports the development of policies that enhance the wellbeing of children in polygynous families.

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