



Influence of Polygamy on Gender-Based Violence Prevalence in South Sudan: A Case Study of Unity State (BENTIU)

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Abstract: *Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a pervasive human rights violation and major public health crisis across South Sudan. While polygamous marriage systems are widely practiced throughout Unity State, their specific influence on household power dynamics, resource distribution, and domestic violence prevalence remains insufficiently investigated within post-conflict displacement settings. Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, this study examined how polygamous marital structures influence GBV forms, identified key socio-economic and structural drivers, and evaluated local formal and informal protection networks in Bentiu Town and Bentiu IDP Camp. A qualitative phenomenological research design was conducted across Rubkona County, Unity State. Primary qualitative data were gathered through 5 Focus Group Discussions (\$n=60\$) with married women in polygamous unions and 21 Key Informant Interviews (\$n=21\$) with traditional chiefs, legal officers, police gender desk officers, healthcare providers, church leaders, and protection managers (\$N=81\$). Qualitative narrative data were transcribed verbatim and analysed using six-stage thematic analysis. Economic abuse characterized by intentional resource withholding, selective provision favouring specific co-wives, and deliberate restriction of female economic autonomy emerged as the most ubiquitous form of violence. Emotional, physical, and sexual violence were concurrently reported. Primary drivers included patriarchal cultural paradigms, high bride wealth demands, intense co-wife competition over scarce household commodities, and women's absolute economic dependency on male providers. While traditional courts, religious bodies, and humanitarian One-Stop Crisis Centres offer localized support, access to formal legal justice is severely obstructed by family silence, structural resource constraints, and customary arbitration that prioritizes marital preservation over survivor protection. The study concludes that GBV within polygamous settings is driven by intersecting patriarchal norms, material deprivation, and weak formal enforcement. Recommendations include expanding statutory legal enforcement, funding women's economic empowerment initiatives, and strengthening mobile health and crisis response services.*

Keywords: Bentiu; Economic Abuse; Gender-Based Violence; Polygamy; South Sudan; Unity State

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1. Introduction

According to UN Women (2025), approximately one in three women worldwide experiences physical or sexual violence during her lifetime, most commonly at the hands of an intimate partner. This demonstrates that gender-based

violence (GBV) is not only a private family issue, but also a global public health, human rights, and development concern. In response, Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) seeks to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls by 2030 by addressing violence, workplace and societal discrimination, and harmful traditional practices (United

Nations, 2026). Overall, GBV represents a catastrophic manifestation of structural power imbalances, operating as both a cause and a consequence of systemic gender inequality across public and private spheres (Ellsberg et al., 2020; World Health Organization WHO, 2021).

At the 80th session of the United Nations General Assembly, which marked 15 years of the Beijing Declaration, 10 countries renewed the world's commitment to promote women's rights through 212 national actions. During the session, UN Women Executive Director Sima Bahous echoed the call for governments to work together to uplift gender equality (UN Women, 2025). To systematically decode how these macro-level social expectations translate into daily domestic conflict, this study adopts Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Heise, 1998). Grounded in this framework, individual experiences of GBV cannot be analyzed in isolation; rather, they are produced by multi-layered, intersecting interactions spanning individual developmental histories, trauma, and educational attainment; micro-level family power structures, spousal communication, and resource allocations; community dispute resolution mechanisms, extended kinship pressures, and neighbor networks; and broader socio-cultural ideologies, macroeconomic instability, environmental shocks, and statutory legal frameworks (Assari, 2013; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Heise, 1998).

The introduction of systemic socio-economic strain, structural adjustment, or mass displacement compounds these baseline inequities, drastically increasing rates of physical, emotional, sexual, and economic abuse across communities (Ellsberg et al., 2020; UNFPA, 2023). Conflict-affected and humanitarian settings across Sub-Saharan Africa present unique structural challenges where historic militarization and cultural paradigms deeply entrench patriarchal control over female bodily autonomy and decision-making capacity (Adong, 2026; Ahinkorah et al., 2018).

Polygamous marital frameworks, wherein a male spouse maintains concurrent marital relationships with multiple wives, are widely practiced, legally recognized, and socially institutionalized across Sub-Saharan Africa (Aboagye et al., 2025; Ahinkorah, 2021). While polygamy historically functioned within agrarian settings as an economic cooperative, labor-pooling system, and social safety net for agrarian expansion, contemporary empirical evidence indicates that modern polygamous unions under extreme poverty frequently foster heightened relational conflict, co-wife rivalry, and severe resource scarcity (Ahinkorah et al., 2018; Bahari et al., 2021; Tsala Dimbuene et al., 2025).

Studies conducted in Europe and North America have examined the experiences of women in polygamous households, particularly within migrant communities where polygamy is practiced under customary or religious traditions (Vacchelli, 2025). Researchers have found that women in these unions frequently experience emotional, economic, and psychological abuse (Bhuller et al., 2022). Although these studies provide useful insights, their findings must be interpreted within their specific social and legal contexts, as most research from Europe and North America focuses on migrant communities living in countries where polygamy is strictly prohibited by statutory law.

Comparatively, empirical studies across diverse regional contexts confirm that women in polygamous marriages face significantly higher risks of physical, emotional, and economic abuse than those in monogamous unions (Aboagye et al., 2025; Ahinkorah, 2021; Tsala Dimbuene et al., 2025). Research conducted in several African countries shows that while not every polygamous marriage results in violence, unequal access to household resources, co-wife competition, unequal decision-making power, and economic dependence significantly increase women's vulnerability to abuse (Munyao & Kilonzo, 2023; Teguo et al., 2025). For instance, a study in Ghana by Aboagye et al. (2025) identified a direct positive association between polygamous unions and intimate partner violence, driven by unequal power relations, cultural marital expectations, and community attitudes toward gender roles.

In South Sudan, decades of protracted armed conflict, political instability, inter-communal violence, mass internal displacement, and severe environmental shocks (such as multi-year catastrophic flooding) have severely fractured social fabrics and formal state institutions (Adong, 2026; Protection Cluster South Sudan, 2024). Ongoing safety risks and economic collapse leave an estimated 2.6 million people needing GBV protection and support services nationwide (UNFPA, 2023). Although Article 16 of the Transitional Constitution of the Republic of South Sudan guarantees equal rights for men and women, mandates protection from gender discrimination, and explicitly directs the state to eliminate harmful traditional practices, statutory enforcement remains profoundly weak and practically absent in rural payams (Transitional Constitution of the Republic of South Sudan, 2011).

Instead, customary law administered exclusively by traditional male elders continues to govern local family disputes, personal status matters, and property transfers, regularly focusing on keeping families together, maintaining social cohesion, and protecting lineage continuity rather than protecting individual female security and enforcing statutory rights (Ministry of Gender, Child

and Social Welfare, 2021). In low- and middle-income contexts recovering from conflict, these baseline vulnerabilities are further exacerbated by absent policy execution, underfunded police units, lacking physical infrastructure, and fragmented protection networks (Ellsberg et al., 2020; Protection Cluster South Sudan, 2024).

Within Unity State and specifically across Rubkona County, encompassing Bentiu Town and the densely populated Bentiu IDP Camp, women face daily safety risks, structural displacement, severe food insecurity, and extreme economic constraints (Protection Cluster South Sudan, 2024). The vast majority of existing humanitarian and academic research in South Sudan has historically concentrated on sexual violence linked to war, military tactics, and non-partner conflict actors (Ellsberg et al., 2020). Consequently, there is a critical empirical gap regarding everyday domestic decisions, resource negotiations, co-wife power dynamics, and intimate partner violence occurring within polygamous homes, even though polygamy characterizes an estimated 40% to 50% of marriages in the area (Aboagye et al., 2025; Ahinkorah, 2021). Evaluating these micro-level dynamics is crucial for developing targeted, context-appropriate interventions, strengthening local protection policies, and fostering genuine economic independence for women across post-conflict zones.

1.1. Problem statement

In South Sudan, polygamous family structures remain widely institutionalized; however, in low-resource and post-conflict displacement settings, severe material deprivation and rigid patriarchal norms significantly compound household instability. While broad protection frameworks exist, gender-based violence within polygamous households remains a persistent public health and human rights crisis.

Despite constitutional provisions guaranteeing equal rights and directing the elimination of harmful traditional practices, statutory legal enforcement is practically absent in rural and displaced communities. Instead, customary law administered by traditional male leaders prioritizes marital preservation and family reconciliation over survivor safety and justice. The vast majority of existing empirical research in South Sudan has focused on war-related sexual violence and non-partner conflict actors, leaving a significant knowledge gap regarding how polygamous marital structures, resource allocation, and co-wife competition influence intimate partner violence within households.

This study sought to address these empirical gaps by evaluating the influence of polygamy on GBV prevalence

in Unity State (Bentiu Town and Bentiu IDP Camp), examining primary socio-economic drivers, and evaluating existing policy and community interventions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Ecological Systems Theory

This study is anchored in Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), adapted for gender-based violence by Heise (1998). The theory posits that human development and social behaviors including violence are produced through complex, interacting systems that surround the individual.

In the context of this study, the individual level captures personal developmental histories, literacy levels, and financial dependency. The microsystem encompasses immediate household power dynamics, spousal communication, co-wife relationships, and resource allocation within polygamous unions. The exosystem includes informal community dispute mechanisms, customary courts, religious institutions, and local protection networks. Finally, the macrosystem encompasses overarching patriarchal cultural paradigms, high bride wealth customs, economic collapse, ongoing conflict, and statutory legal frameworks (Assari, 2013; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Heise, 1998). Using this multi-layered framework allows for a comprehensive understanding of how structural macro-inequities filter down to influence intimate partner violence in low-resource settings.

2.2 Empirical Literature

2.2.1 Polygamy and Intimate Partner Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa

Empirical evidence across Sub-Saharan Africa indicates that polygamous marital arrangements significantly heighten women's exposure to intimate partner violence compared to monogamous arrangements. Aboagye et al. (2025) conducted a comprehensive multi-country analysis examining polygamous unions and intimate partner violence across Sub-Saharan Africa. Their findings demonstrated a direct positive association between polygamy and increased physical and psychological abuse, driven by unequal power structures and entrenched gender roles. However, the study relied primarily on quantitative national demographic data, leaving a contextual gap regarding the nuanced qualitative experiences of displaced women in post-conflict settings.

Similarly, Ahinkorah (2021) analyzed demographic and health survey data from 16 Sub-Saharan African countries, confirming that polygyny significantly elevated the odds of emotional, physical, and sexual violence. Ahinkorah et al. (2018) further established that limited female decision-making autonomy within polygamous households directly correlated with higher abuse rates. While these large-scale quantitative studies established global statistical associations, they did not capture how acute humanitarian crises, food insecurity, and aid dependence interact with co-wife competition.

2.2.2 Micro-Level Resource Scarcity and Co-Wife Competition

In low-resource settings, polygamous households face severe friction due to unequal material distribution. Bahari et al. (2021) investigated domestic conflict in East Africa, establishing that modern polygamous unions under economic strain suffer from chronic emotional abuse and relational conflict. Tsala Dimbuene et al. (2025) evaluated sub-national estimates in the Democratic Republic of Congo, finding that resource scarcity severely amplifies co-wife rivalry and intimate partner violence.

In South Sudan, Adong (2026) examined socio-economic vulnerabilities and GBV in conflict-affected zones, highlighting that economic dependence traps women in abusive structures. Ellsberg et al. (2020) conducted a landmark study on violence against women in South Sudan, confirming exceptionally high rates of intimate partner violence. However, their research primarily highlighted conflict-driven and non-partner violence, leaving an empirical gap regarding everyday domestic decision-making and co-wife resource dynamics in displacement camps such as Bentiu.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological case study research design. A qualitative approach was selected to capture the lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings that women attach to gender-based violence within polygamous marriages in post-conflict displacement settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Oluka, 2025).

The target population encompassed married women living in polygamous unions and key protection stakeholders in Rubkona County, Unity State, which has a total population of approximately 361,802 people (UN OCHA, 2025). The study focused on two primary operational sites: Bentiu Town (the administrative capital) and Bentiu IDP Camp, which hosts 109,365 displaced individuals across 16,490 households (IOM DTM, 2025). Demographic data indicate that 40% to 50% of married women in this region live in

polygamous unions (Ministry of Health & National Bureau of Statistics, 2010; UNFPA, 2025).

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who possessed relevant direct experience and domain knowledge (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The final sample comprised **81 total respondents** (70 women and 11 men):

- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** 5 FGD sessions were conducted with married women living in polygamous households (\$n=60\$).
- **Key Informant Interviews (KIIs):** 21 in-depth interviews (\$n=21\$) were conducted with traditional chiefs, legal officers, police gender desk officers, healthcare providers, church leaders, state gender officers, and protection managers.

Data collection instruments included semi-structured interview guides, focus group discussion guides, and a documentary review checklist covering constitutional texts, national strategies, and humanitarian protection reports (Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare, 2021; Protection Cluster South Sudan, 2024; Transitional Constitution of the Republic of South Sudan, 2011). A pilot study was conducted in Bentiu Town with 15% of the target sample to refine question clarity. Trustworthiness was maintained through Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Qualitative data were transcribed, translated into English from local languages and Arabic, coded in SPSS for demographic profiles, and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage thematic analysis framework. Ethical approvals were secured from the Ministry of General Education and Higher Institutions, state authorities in Unity State, and local administration.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Findings

4.1.1 Response Rate and Socio-Demographic Profile

A total of 81 participants successfully participated across 5 Focus Group Discussions (\$n=60\$) and 21 Key Informant Interviews (\$n=21\$), achieving a 100% participation rate based on the qualitative sample design. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 80 years. Females constituted 70% of respondents, while males accounted for 30%.

Employment status revealed severe economic vulnerability among female participants:

- **61.7%** were completely unemployed and fully dependent on male spouses.
- **31.9%** relied on informal petty trade (selling firewood, charcoal, tea).
- **6.4%** held formal salaried employment.

High illiteracy and absolute economic reliance heavily erode female bargaining capacity in the household, trapping women in abusive domestic arrangements (Adong, 2026; Ahinkorah et al., 2018).

4.1.2 Forms of Gender-Based Violence in Polygamous Households

Participants reported widespread, overlapping forms of domestic violence. Economic abuse emerged as the most ubiquitous and foundational form of violence across all focus groups.

The table below presents the distribution and operational dynamics of reported GBV forms.

Forms of GBV in Polygamous Households

Form of Violence	Reported Frequency	Percentage	Main Behavioural Examples & Operational Dynamics
Economic Abuse	28	31%	Withholding food money or medical funds, favouring one wife over others with basic supplies, blocking female income activities, seizing aid rations.
Physical Violence	24	27%	Slapping, hitting, kicking, throwing objects, and physical altercations caused by arguments over missing household food money or co-wife jealousy.
Emotional & Psychological Abuse	22	25%	Showing unfair favour, insults, public embarrassment, threats to add junior wives or discard a wife, social isolation, refusal to speak.
Sexual Violence & Coercion	15	17%	Forced marital sexual access, demanding sex in exchange for basic food allowances or household support, refusal of safe sex practices.

Source: Field Data, 2026

As shown in Table 1, Economic Abuse was the most frequent form (31%), followed by Physical Violence (27%), Emotional/Psychological Abuse (25%), and Sexual Violence (17%). In conditions of severe humanitarian distress, husbands use financial control to demand obedience. Unfair resource allocation favouring specific co-wives routinely triggers verbal altercations that escalate into physical violence. A female participant in Bentiu IDP Camp explained:

"When food is not enough, the husband gives money only to his favourite wife. If you ask why your children have not eaten while the other hut has food, it brings arguments and beatings. You are told that if you cannot stay with what you get, you can leave, but you cannot leave because you have nowhere to go and no cattle to repay." (Focus Group Discussion, Bentiu IDP Camp, 2026)

4.1.3 Socio-Cultural and Economic Drivers

Qualitative narrative analysis revealed four primary structural drivers of GBV in polygamous settings:

1. **Patriarchal Cultural Norms:** Men are culturally designated as absolute heads of households. Women who challenge spousal decisions are labelled disrespectful, enforcing silence (Adong, 2026).
2. **Economic Dependence:** Lack of personal capital forces women to endure ongoing physical and emotional abuse to secure food and shelter for their children.
3. **Co-Wife Competition:** Scarcity of food and aid commodities in displacement settings turns co-wife relationships into intense rivalries, escalating domestic friction.
4. **Bride Wealth Expectations:** High bride wealth paid in cattle creates a perception of male

ownership. Participants noted that men frequently cite bride wealth payments to justify domestic dominance and control.

4.1.4 Existing Policy and Community Interventions

While protection frameworks exist, silence and endurance remain primary coping mechanisms due to social stigma, fear of spousal abandonment, and family pressure (UNFPA, 2023).

- **Customary Courts & Religious Bodies:** Customary courts headed by male chiefs are accessible but prioritize family reconciliation and lineage cohesion over survivor safety, often returning women to dangerous homes (Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare, 2021). Religious bodies offer moral support but similarly stress marital preservation.
- **Statutory Police & One-Stop Crisis Centres:** Police Gender Desks and One-Stop Crisis Centres provide legal and medical support but face severe constraints, including physical distance, transport costs, lack of operational funds, and community pressure to settle cases out of court.

4.2 Discussion of Findings

The findings confirm that polygamous marital dynamics in low-resource post-conflict settings significantly escalate domestic violence, with economic abuse serving as the primary catalyst. Scarcity of resources combined with male-controlled financial allocations creates severe structural strain within the household microsystem.

These findings align with prior research by Aboagye et al. (2025) and Ahinkorah (2021), who identified significant positive relationships between polygamous unions and intimate partner violence across African contexts. Furthermore, the findings support Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Macro-level shocks such as conflict displacement, inflation, and weak legal enforcement interact with exosystem customary norms and microsystem co-wife competition to generate high levels of abuse at the individual level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Heise, 1998). Reforming local customary court practices and strengthening female financial independence are therefore essential to breaking this cycle of violence.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study concludes that gender-based violence within polygamous families in Bentiu Town and Bentiu IDP

Camp is driven by an intersecting web of patriarchal traditions, severe household poverty, high bride wealth demands, and weak statutory legal enforcement. Economic abuse manifested through deliberate resource withholding, aid manipulation, and co-wife favouritism is the most prevalent form of violence and directly triggers physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Existing local dispute mechanisms rely heavily on customary courts that prioritize marital preservation over survivor protection. Reducing GBV in polygamous settings requires moving beyond basic constitutional declarations to deliver concrete female economic empowerment and statutory legal reform.

5.2. Recommendations

Based on the study findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Humanitarian & Donor Agencies:** Should establish Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs), micro-grant programs, and vocational training specifically tailored for women in polygamous unions to eliminate absolute financial dependency on male spouses.
2. **Health & Protection Partners:** Should deploy mobile One-Stop Centres to outlying IDP camp sectors and rural payams to provide immediate clinical management, psychosocial counselling, and legal assistance to GBV survivors.
3. **Government & State Authorities:** The Ministry of Justice and Unity State government must equip police Special Protection Units (SPUs) with logistics, transport, and training to independently investigate domestic violence and enforce statutory law.
4. **Customary Judicial Reform:** State authorities should collaborate with paramount chiefs to establish binding customary court guidelines that mandate the immediate transfer of all physical battery and sexual violence cases to formal statutory courts.

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