

Polygamy is harmful to society, scholar finds

By Daphne Bramham,

Vancouver Sun

July 17, 2010

Increased crime, prostitution and anti-social behaviour. Greater inequality between men and women. Less parental investment in children. And, a general driving down of the age of marriage for all women.

These are some of the harms of polygamy (or more correctly, polygyny, since it is almost always men marrying more than once) that are outlined in a 45-page research paper by noted Canadian scholar Joseph Henrich, filed Friday in B.C. Supreme Court.

Henrich is uniquely qualified to look at polygamy's harm. He's a member of the departments of economics, psychology and anthropology at the University of British Columbia and holds the Canada Research Chair in Culture, Cognition and Coevolution.

But he'd never really thought about it until this year when Craig Jones approached him. Jones is the lead lawyer in the B.C. government's constitutional reference case, which will be heard in November by B.C. Supreme Court Chief Justice Robert Bauman.

Now, Henrich's conclusions form part of the intellectual and evidentiary underpinning for the province's argument that even if outlawing polygamy breaches the constitutional guarantees of religious freedom and freedom of expression, it's justified.

In addition to Henrich's paper, the government has filed or will be filing affidavits from other specialists in the history of Western polygamy, Islamic law, psychology and medicine.

Fifteen former fundamentalist Mormons have provided video testimony about their experiences growing up in polygamous communities in Canada and the United States.

Among them is Truman Oler. He is the 28-year-old brother of James Oler, the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints bishop in Bountiful, and the nephew of Winston Blackmore, the former bishop who now heads a breakaway sect.

But for James Oler and Blackmore, there would be no court case. Both men were charged with polygamy in 2009. But after those charges were stayed, Attorney-General Mike de Jong asked the B.C. Supreme Court to rule on the law's constitutionality.

To illustrate the harm, Henrich provides the court with an example of polygyny's cruel arithmetic.

In a hypothetical society of 20 men and 20 women, 12 men with the highest status marry 12 women. (It's always only the highest-ranking men in polygynous societies that get multiple wives.)

Then, the top five take a second wife and the top two men take a third. Finally, the top guy takes a fourth.

The result is that 58 per cent of the marriages are monogamous.

But -and this is the big deal -it means 40 per cent of the men remain unmarried.

Yes, 40 per cent.

And Henrich's example is conservative. Blackmore has more than 20 wives. FLDS prophet Warren Jeffs, who is in jail in Utah, has more than 80.

And the studies Henrich cites -from historical, frontier-American research to contemporary work done in countries where polygamy is legal -indicate that groups of unmarried men create havoc.

"For males, getting married (monogamously) is a prophylactic against engaging in crime, social disruption and other socially undesirable activities," he writes.

In India and China, where male-biased sex selection has resulted in more men than women, researchers found "bachelor bands that compete ferociously and engage in aggressive, violent and anti-social activities."

China's one-child policy resulted in the number of "surplus" men nearly doubling ... along with the crime rates. In a recent study, researchers there concluded that for every 0.01 increase in sex ratio, property and violent crimes rise by three per cent.

In India, the state of Kerala's murder rate is half that of Uttar Pradesh. The reason? Kerala's male-to-female ratio is 97:100; Uttar Pradesh's is 112:100.

Another social harm that Henrich says is consistent regardless of whether researchers use data from 19th-century Mormon communities or contemporary African societies is that children from polygynous families have considerably lower survival rates. It seems polygynous men, rather than investing in their offspring, use their money to add wives.

"Monogamy seems to direct male motivations in ways that create lower crime rates, greater wealth (GDP) per capita and better outcomes for children," Henrich concludes.

But what's more surprising than his conclusions is his speculation that monogamy is at the root of democracy and equality.

He argues that as the idea of monogamy spread through Europe during the 15th century, king and peasant alike had the same rules and the idea of equality gained a foothold -- at least among men.

With reduced competition for women, men began loosening their tight control over wives and daughters.

And with fewer unmarried men, the pool of soldiers that had previously been harnessed by warring rulers was reduced.

Even though this compelling argument goes far beyond the scope of the trial, it may make it even harder for polygamy's advocates to convince the judge that its practice is benign.

dbramham@vancouver.sun.com

<http://www.vancouver.sun.com/news/Polygamy+harmful+society+scholar+finds/3290757/story.html>

