

# POLYGyny, SERODISCORDANCE AND HIV RISK IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION

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**Background:** Polygyny is the most common form of polygamy worldwide and involves a man marrying more than one wife. Polygyny is practiced in vastly different religious and cultural contexts, including in Papua New Guinea (PNG). The literature on the role of polygyny in the global HIV epidemic is limited and contradictory, with researchers arguing that polygynous marriages are either protective against HIV or a critical risk factor. However, neither argument accounts for the diversity of polygyny, nor for the myriad local factors that can shape such unions. Even less attention has been paid to serodiscordant polygynous marriages in which one or more partners is HIV positive.

**Methods:** This presentation draws on findings from a longitudinal study of the socio-cultural aspects of biomedicine and HIV among couples and polygynous spouses with mixed HIV status in PNG. Interviews with 51 participants were conducted in Mt. Hagen and Port Moresby in 2017, with follow-up interviews in 2018 and 2019. We focus on a subset of 14 participants (four men, 10 women) in serodiscordant polygynous heterosexual relationships.

**Results:** Polygynous marriages were not a homogenous practice; they manifested in different and shifting constellations in terms of number of spouses, living arrangements, meaning, durability, and gender of the spouse(s) with HIV. Not all spouses were aware of who in the union had HIV. Risk perceptions and prevention practices were strongly influenced by Christianity and cultural understandings of the virus and HIV treatment, which did not always align with biomedical messages.

**Conclusion:** Polygynous marriages in PNG are more complex than being either protective or risky in relation to HIV. Our findings highlight the imperative to understand serodiscordant polygynous unions more comprehensively than has been done thus far, including risk perceptions and prevention practices within such relationships, to strengthen national HIV prevention and treatment efforts in PNG.

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