

## **The (Unintended) Consequences of Changing Polygyny Legislation**

Across Africa, shifts in the legal status of polygyny – from prohibition to liberalisation – are rapidly transforming the institutional landscape of marriage. Yet, the effects of these legal reforms and their implications for women’s outcomes remain poorly understood. This study examines the consequences of recent legislative changes in Benin, Kenya, and Nigeria. Drawing on Demographic and Health Surveys and employing event-study designs, we find that in Nigeria the legalisation of polygyny was followed by an increase in polygynous unions, particularly among rural, less-educated, Muslim women. Conversely, while changes in the legal status of polygyny had limited effects on its incidence in Benin and Kenya – where a ban and a liberalisation were, respectively, implemented, we find evidence of changes in decision-making power for women in polygynous unions. In particular, the ban in Benin was associated with a decline in women’s decision-making power, while legalisation in Kenya was followed by a significant increase, especially on household purchases. Our findings provide important evidence of the complex, often unanticipated and divergent consequences of top-down legal reforms into the sphere of marriage. Importantly, they underscore the constantly evolving nature of this institution, cautioning against reductive views depicting polygyny as a uniformly oppressive institution perpetuating patriarchal structures.