

Article

**Covid-19 and Women's Mental Health: A Case of Women in Polygamous Marriages in Johane Marange Apostolic Church in Zimbabwe**

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**Abstract:** The government's COVID-19 measures, including a nationwide lockdown and social distancing, presented a challenge for Johane Marange Apostolic Church (JMAC) in their implementation. Unfortunately, the women in the church could not voice their concerns about the leadership's shortcomings in this area. This study utilizes Gender justice theory to investigate how JMAC's teachings on polygamous marriages impacted the mental health of women during the pandemic. Through purposive sampling, interviews, and secondary sources, it was discovered that women in polygamous marriages in JMAC struggled mentally during COVID-19 due to their roles as wives and their positions in the church. While the church allows polygamous marriages, the study suggests that women's decision-making power should be elevated, and men should take more responsibility as breadwinners. The study also recommends that the church's teachings should be more adaptable during future pandemics to improve the mental health and well-being of women. Ultimately, the study proposes that congregants should be free to choose. The implication of the study will be for a paradigm shift in the beliefs and practices of JMAC, which encourage polygamy and result in mental health challenges during pandemics like COVID-19.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; women's mental health; polygamous marriages; JMAC; Zimbabwe

## Introduction

Despite the extensive measures taken by the government to contain the spread of COVID-19, the Johane Marange Apostolic Church (JMAC) remains reluctant to abide by safety protocols. Despite the global implementation of national lockdowns, social distancing, and vaccination drives to combat COVID-19, JMAC prohibits its members from receiving vaccinations and attending church gatherings. This disregard for safety measures has resulted in the proliferation of COVID-19 throughout the church's congregation. Despite the national lockdown prohibiting gatherings and travel, JMAC still holds church events where individuals move around without adhering to social distancing guidelines. Several sources, including Chitando (2014), Vengei (2016), Sibanda (2011), Tsara (2022), and Kutsira (2015), state that members of JMAC, are not permitted to receive vaccinations from Western modern medicine, including the COVID-19 vaccine. This puts a significant amount of pressure on women in the community who are often responsible for caring for the sick, especially those affected by COVID-19.

Unfortunately, many women in JMAC struggle because they lack protective clothing that meets the World Health Organization's (WHO) standards and cannot seek medical attention for themselves or their loved ones due to the church's prohibition on modern health services. This has led to many tragic deaths within the

community. The reason behind conducting this study is the trend of young girls dropping out of school and getting married in the Marange community in Zimbabwe, where polygamous marriages are prevalent. This trend is the driving force behind the interest in researching the aspect of polygamous marriages in JMAC. According to Machingura (2011:1), unless there is a change in the apostolic sects' beliefs, teachings, and practices regarding HIV and AIDS awareness programs directed toward these sects, the women of Zimbabwe will continue to suffer. Similarly, Chikwature (2016) conducted a study that revealed that children belonging to polygamous marriages often struggle with the stress associated with these marriages, resulting in their poor performance in school. In line with this research, a JMAC woman who was the first wife in a polygamous marriage among seven wives shared her testimony.

*“If you do not work hard in a polygamous marriage, you will die of hunger. She emphasized that in their church, it is not the duty of men to provide for the family; instead, women are competing to prepare good food to appease the man”* (Interview with Mrs. X., 27 years old, 12 May 2023).

This situation brought much stress to women, for many of them, during COVID-19, engaged in risky activities to feed their families. The above testimony also concurs with the research conducted by Vengei (2013) and Tsara (2021), which shows that most young girls in JMAC who are in polygamous marriages are at a higher risk of STIs and mental health problems since they are married to men who are as old as their fathers. This story and other research by the above scholars intrigued me and raised many questions, such as: 1. What did JMAC teach about polygamous marriages? 2. What might have influenced JMAC's theology of polygamous marriages? 3. What is the basis for marriage in JMAC? These, among other questions, motivated me to undertake this study and interrogate the teachings of JMAC on polygamous marriages to fully understand their basis for women's mental health during pandemics such as COVID-19. The study presents that even though polygamous marriages are celebrated in African culture, they have consequences for women's mental health, for they are the ones who carry all the burden of maintaining the home as well as the husband. The situation was worse during COVID-19. This study uses purposive sampling and secondary sources to gather the necessary data for the research.

## Literature Review

The JMAC belief in relying solely on the Divine Omniscience of the Holy Spirit for healing has resulted in their members being excluded from accessing modern health services. This has posed a significant challenge, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Numerous studies were carried out on the subject by (Makamure, 2023; Marevesa, 2023; Tsara, 2022; Sibanda, 2011; Kutsira, 2015; Vengei, 2013). This research aims to contribute to the existing knowledge by investigating how the ban on modern health services affected the mental health of JMAC women during the pandemic. The study also explores the impact of polygamous marriages on women's mental health during pandemics. Furthermore, Machingura (2011) highlights that one of the advantages of polygamous marriages is the birth of multiple sons, who can provide additional income by assisting their fathers with domestic labor. Machingura further discusses that men marry more wives to create large families. Similarly, Sachiti (2011) also postulates that large families are not egalitarian or focused on individualism; instead, they are highly group-oriented, focusing on the family as a whole unit. When individuals or families do not conform to traditional norms of religion or culture, they may be reprimanded or rejected. For this reason, women attempt to keep their families together despite the problems they typically face. Unlike this research, these scholars focused on the benefits of polygamous marriages, whereas this research focused more on the effects of polygamous marriages during pandemics. This research emphasizes the mental health challenges that result from large families of polygamous marriages during COVID-19, which include the burden of child upkeep, including school expectation costs.

This study delves into the mental health challenges faced by women in polygamous marriages. These challenges include abuse, psychological distress, low self-esteem, and marital discord. The researchers mentioned above did not emphasize these challenges. Elbedour et al. (2012) highlight that frequent marital agony and jealousy can cause emotional harm to these women due to unequal treatment by their husbands. In

most cases, they cannot receive the necessary emotional support from their husband. Disgruntlement with the family often increases with the addition of wives by the husband. Senior wives whose husbands marry subsequent wives usually perceive themselves as having failed to meet the demands needed by their husbands and the community, resulting in low self-esteem and, in most cases, silently suffering from mental health when their husbands perceive them as old (Elbedour et al., 2012). It is important to note that this scholar talks about the effects of polygamy in general without focusing on times of pandemics such as COVID-19, which is the focus of this research.

The above has also been supported by Machingura (2011:1) when he elucidates that the suffering of Zimbabwean women will not end unless there is a paradigm shift in the attitudes, practices, and teachings of apostolic sects in terms of more extensive HIV and AIDS awareness campaigns directed at these sects. These sentiments concur with Vengei (2013) and Tsara (2021), who alluded that most young girls in JMAC who are in polygamous marriages are at a higher risk of STIs and mental health problems since they are married to men who are as old as their fathers. These ideas point to the fact that the apostolic sects such as JMAC are rigid to change even when there is a pandemic. In line with that, Marevesa (2023) also postulates that the teachings and Beliefs of JMAC subject women and girls to gender-based violence at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, Oduyoye and Kanyoro (1993) have advocated for the depatriarchalizing of the church. The main argument is that since men are involved in decisions that affect women, women need to stand for themselves in the church's decision-making. Women should also be given influential leadership positions to implement positive change to the status of women in their church. Furthermore, they alluded that there is a need to question the church's teaching on polygamy, for it is always the man who has the liberty to marry many wives as they please. At the same time, women are always encouraged to be faithful to their partners, even if they are polygamous.

Moreover, Vengei (2021) challenged this motif by saying that women in JMAC should rise and challenge the status quo. They should be like great women of the Bible who managed to challenge the status quo of the day, the story of Queen Esther, and in African culture, we have women like Mbuya Nehanda who managed to challenge the white missionaries more vividly and finally become role models. This was also highlighted by Hatendi (2022) in her study when she alluded that, to liberate themselves from the teachings of JMAC on contraceptive use, most married women in JMAC are now free from being submissive sexual and reproductive organs through the covert use of contemporary contraception. This enabled the women in JMAC to realize their full rights and stop being toys by men. In line with these scholars, this research goes deeper in advocating for a paradigm shift in the belief and practices of JMAC, particularly during pandemics like COVID-19; women must stand up to challenge teachings such as that of not accessing modern health services since they are the ones who are at most risk of taking care of the sick from these highly contagious diseases.

This research, through interviews conducted, finds that if a woman feels obliged to enter a polygamous marriage and to engage in sexual relations once married, polygamy will affect her sense of dignity and self-worth because a man will be following a duty roster. If the wives are seven, it means they meet the husband once per week. It must be noted that some of these circumstances experienced by women subject them to high psychological and emotional health problems. This automatically causes mental health challenges, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this research is of paramount importance for it brings the gap in knowledge from the previous researchers who talk of the effects of JMAC teachings in general without focusing on a particular focus of the effects of polygamous marriages during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 1. Theoretical Framework

The following table displays the two theoretical frameworks utilized in this research: the Gender Justice Theory and the African Cultural Feminist Hermeneutics Theory. The final column of the table indicates the common concepts and ideas shared by both frameworks. This last column represents the intersection of Gender Justice Theory and African Cultural Feminist Theory, highlighting the shared goals and principles of challenging patriarchal norms, centering marginalized voices, and empowering communities through cultural transformation.

Table 1. The Intersection of gender justice and African cultural feminist theory

Gender justice	African Cultural feminist hermeneutics	Overlaps/Point of Intersection
-Power analysis: Examine how the church’s teachings reinforce power structures, perpetuating gender inequalities and potentially increasing women’s vulnerability during pandemics.	-Cultural contextualization: Examines how the church’s teachings are shaped by and reinforce harmful patriarchal norms and cultural values potentially harming women during pandemics.	-Both theories Challenge patriarchal norms
-Equality and Equity: Analyze how the church’s teachings may perpetuate unequal gender roles and limit women’s autonomy, decision-making, and access to resources, including health care during pandemics. Violence exacerbates women’s experiences during pandemics.	-Feminist interpretation: Alternative interpretations of religious texts and teachings prioritizing gender justice, equality, and women’s empowerment during pandemics.	Both theories are centering marginalized voices.
-Intersectionality Consider how polygamous marriages intersect with other factors like economic instability, lack of access to health care, and gender-based:	-Community-centred- approach: Highlight the importance of community support and solidarity in addressing the needs of women and marginalized groups during pandemics rather than reinforcing harmful gender roles and power dynamics.	-Both theories emphasize empowerment through community.
	-Decolonization	-Cultural transformation

The study's conceptualization is grounded in gender justice theory (GT) and African cultural feminist hermeneutics, which advocate for bettering personal choices instead of specific community results Devins (1988), as shown in the above table. Although not applied to Apostolic religious practices, the gender justice theory is constructive for this research. This thought developed out of how society understood women. To support the free choice model, the theory focused on how women in polygamous marriages are treated traditionally and in the modern world, mainly how they are notably restricted from participating in public policy and church decision-making. Policies that are intended to safeguard and defend women mistreat them and prevent them from exercising their fundamental right to self-determination. According to Devins (1988:22), GJT is steadfast in upholding the equal opportunity principle, emphasizing that people with similar capacities and drive should have equal opportunities to realize their life goals. Women and men should be viewed equally because both can make decisions. The argument highlights the importance of individual choice and the ability to decide results, supporting gender-neutral policy. This argument is pertinent to the study because it argues that women in JMAC who are married in polygamous marriages do not fully exercise their right to free will because men set the church's laws and decisions.

The African cultural feminist hermeneutics theory aims to address the unique experiences of women. It focuses mainly on their struggles against patriarchy and issues related to health and education, among others, as discussed by Kanyoro (2002) and Oduyoye (2001). This theory has been applied to examine how the Bible and culture have been used to subjugate women in JMAC. Its purpose is to reveal and criticize the features of polygamy in biblical and African cultures that deprive women of their lives while also recovering aspects that grant women life (Kanyoro, 2002). The goal of African cultural feminist hermeneutics is to establish a creative world that celebrates diversity in terms of social, cultural, economic, and religious liberties.

A subset of liberation theology that belonged to a more prominent family of feminist theology is the African cultural feminist hermeneutics theory. It grows from African liberation and socialization hermeneutics (Phiri, 2004). It is centered on gender and the patriarchal way that males dominate women. Male liberationists have taken this aspect for granted. The theory is credulous of both American culture and biblical texts that perpetuate /promote patriarchy that denigrates women to men. This contrasts with acculturation hermeneutics, which similarly uses the Bible to other forms of liberation hermeneutics to fight against women's subordination

in modern society. When reading the Bible, African women approach it in different ways. African women's hermeneutics can be found in the book "Other Ways of Reading" by Dube (2001), where several African women who are biblical scholars read the text from various perspectives. For example, Nadar (2001) used feminist ideas and a literal method to contextually understand Ruth's character and show South African women how Ruth might be a positive role model for them. In a comparable manner, Masenya (2001) based her hermeneutics on the Bible and termed it "Bosadi" (womanhood).

She reads Proverbs 31 using this method to illustrate what a South African reader's ideal lady should be. To assess the state of Moab and Judah's foreign relations, which were symbolized by Ruth and Naomi, two women, Dube (2001) employs postcolonial feminist hermeneutics divination theories. She concludes that because Ruth was subjected to abuse by Naomi while she was in a relationship with a slave owner, the transnational ties were unhealthy. However, this knowledge is relevant to our research because we saw how JMAC has used some biblical scriptures to support its beliefs on polygamous marriages, which in turn causes issues with women's mental health.

The significance of African culture in shaping women's interpretation and understanding of the Bible is a crucial contribution of African feminist cultural hermeneutics. Kanyoro (2002: 20) stresses that how the Bible is utilized and deciphered in societal contexts has a more significant impact on African readers' cultures than the text's timeless truths. To address this issue, Kanyoro (2002) employs feminist cultural hermeneutics as a framework for cultural examination. Women can extract empowering insights from the text by applying critical analysis skills and reading the Bible through an African lens.

## Methodology

### 1. Research Design

This study is based on empirical research focusing on Gender Justice and the African cultural feminist research paradigm. The chosen methodology was based on the mental health effects that women face during pandemics like Covid-19. The study aims to identify the impact of polygamous marriages and patriarchal JMAC teachings on mental health challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Macmillan and Schumacher (2011:162), the research design is the plan for generating empirical evidence to answer research questions or problems. It deals with four issues that include which questions to study, which data is relevant, what data to collect, and how to analyze the results of the data collected (Robson. 1993:16). This research used JMAC as a case study design to investigate the phenomenon of polygamous marriages.

The study was conducted using qualitative research methods, which are ideal for gaining a deeper understanding of a particular community, according to Babie and Mourton (2011). Data collection tools like interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and secondary sources were used to uncover the depth, richness, and complexity of JMAC teachings on polygamous marriages. The case study was conducted in the Marange community of Manicaland, where the researcher had the opportunity to interview women involved in polygamous marriages intentionally.

### 2. Sampling and Selection Procedure

A sample of 25 JMAC respondents, 15 women in polygamous marriages, and ten senior male members aged 22 to 75 were included in this study. Purposive sampling and snowball sampling were used to identify these members. The study's objectives, which included presenting preliminary data on aspects of women's mental health connected to polygamous marital traditions in the church, can be met with the help of purposive sampling. Senior members in church leadership participate because they know the church's teachings on polygamous marriages, history, and fundamental principles. The church members employed snowball sampling to identify women who are members of polygamous marriages to find and include people whom they believed to be reliable sources of information on the church's beliefs and practices, such as how the church views polygamous marriages. Among the selected were senior members who had been attending the church for more than ten years and the son of the founding father of JMAC in Marange. We are sure that we have

reflected both the modern viewpoints of the younger study participants who have completed high school and the institutional memory of the church organization from our interviews.

### 3. Data Collection Process

The data for this study was gathered in January 2023. We employ open-ended questions to facilitate focus group conversations on the important historical, cultural, and modern church activities in four main areas: 1) The basis of the church on polygamous marriages, 2) The teachings of the church, and 3) The surviving strategies of women during COVID-19. 4) The effects of polygamous marriages on women's mental health. Participants' first or native language, Manyika, was used to collect the data. This was done to facilitate better communication between the researcher and the respondents, produce extensive data, and capture fixed cultural norms critical to understanding the data in context. We guarantee the validity and reliability of the survey by allowing the respondents to freely direct the discourse away from their independently developed consensus point on the concerns. Before the sessions, participants might revisit any area of the interview with additional questions or comments they thought were essential to understand fully. We can further triangulate data from overlapping questions by searching for consistent participant responses.

### 4. Data analysis

As the research was qualitative, thematic analysis was deemed the most appropriate data analysis method. After collecting all necessary data, it was subjected to thematic analysis. This analysis involves grouping interview data into themes, particularly those with similar characteristics. These themes include ideas, topics, and patterns of meaning that repeatedly emerge throughout the study. For this research, the data was grouped under four main themes:

- i. The foundations of polygamous marriages in JMAC.
- ii. The church's teachings on polygamous marriages.
- iii. The survival strategies adopted by women during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- iv. The impact of polygamous marriages on women's mental health.

### 5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical consideration procedures were followed to avoid causing harm to the respondents (Mouton, 2001) in the form of informed consent and voluntary participation. Moreover, confidentiality and privacy were guaranteed to respondents using pseudonyms. All interviews conducted were coded 'Mrs. X' if female and 'Mr. X' if male. Variations of respondents will be checked on their age. Since the church is very conservative about disseminating its information, the researchers did not use the actual names of the respondents to make sure that they gave all the information freely without any fear of victimization from the church leaders. All the recorded data and questionnaires were kept in confidence by the researchers.

## Findings and Discussion

### 1. The Basis of Polygamous Marriages in JMAC

Research conducted on the topic of polygamous marriages and mental health within the Johanne Marange Apostolic Church (JMAC) has confirmed that the church supports polygamy as an advantageous social and economic practice that aligns with the Biblical (OT) way of life and is an essential aspect of African living (Machingura, 2011:194; Marevesa, 2023). However, belonging to polygamous families in Zimbabwe can have both positive and negative impacts on women's mental health. Culturally, polygamy is viewed as a reproductive strategy that allows men to maximize the number of their offspring or aid in cases of barrenness. As a highly patriarchal religion, JMAC grants men control over women and deems an excellent wife to bear many children, particularly male ones. Polygamous men are believed to have more power and success the more wives they have (Chikwature, 2016). Additionally, polygamy is seen as a sign of high social status.

According to the information from the respondents, polygamy is practiced in the church to prevent men from committing adultery. The three women highlighted that:

*“No men would want to eat sadza and chicken every day; no men would want to eat sadza and vegetables every day; no men would want to eat sadza and beef every day. On the same note, they further elucidated that even the cooking recipe needs to be changed. They went further, asking me a question: What is better if your husband goes outside of marriage and commits adultery with a prostitute you do not know than for you to live together in a polygamous marriage knowing each other (knowing that you are drinking on the same well)?”*

(Interview from a focus group discussion, three females, 23, 45 and 32 years old, respectively)

Following the above sentiments, the study also found that women in JMAC justify the need for men to have polygamous marriages. According to the responses of the women above, the basis of polygamy in JMAC is to prevent men from committing adultery. By so doing, women are to suffer to satisfy the needs of men. At the same time, women see no sin in it due to indoctrination since childbirth. One of the respondents postulates that:

*“We do not care about getting married to polygamous marriages because even our mothers also belong to polygamous marriages.”*

(Interview with Mrs. X is female and 30 years old)

This again points to the fact that women have been used to the mental health stress associated with polygamous marriages since childbirth. On the issue of COVID-19, one informant reiterated that:

*“The coming of covid 19 was not a problem to us because even with other pandemics such as HIV and AIDs, we were not afraid. After all, we strongly believe that God takes good care of us. Our church is so powerful to heal every disease. The Holy Spirit is there to detect what should be done when pandemics such as COVID-19 come ...”*

(Interview with Mr. X, male, 47 years old)

From these sentiments, the study found that the JMAC members believed that pandemics were a punishment for sinners. In the case of HIV and AIDS, they think that their men would not catch the diseases since they marry virgins (Tsara2022). Then, COVID-19 was regarded as a disease meant to punish the whites for oppressing the Africans; hence, they were not afraid of catching it. This then reduces stress and mental health challenges associated with COVID-19 since it was a thing well catered for by the church.

## 2. The Church’s Teachings on Polygamous Marriages

The marriage practice known as polygamy is viewed differently in many societies. In some societies, polygamy is seen as a taboo that is not widely understood or accepted, e.g., in the Roman Catholic Church. Polygamy is commonly practiced in the Apostolic churches and some upcoming Pentecostal churches Sachiti (2011). One of the Apostolic churches where polygamous marriages are common is JMAC. The JMAC teaches or encourages men to have two or more wives if they can sufficiently look after them. The JMAC teaching always puts men at an advantage compared to women, who are always viewed as the property of men. This has also been noted by Kanyoro (2001:17), who highlighted that “when a woman gets married, it is just like she is transferred from being under the power of men to the power of husband.” In such regard, women are regarded as male property. The same can also be witnessed during covid 19; despite the high alert of COVID-19 as a highly contagious disease, women had no power to prevent their husbands from visiting other women in polygamous marriages. In most cases, as highlighted by some respondents:

*“In most polygamous marriages, they stay under one roof, they use the same pots, and they eat their food together. No woman is superior to the other.”*

(Interview from a focus group discussion, four females, 25,30,36,40 years respectively.)

Moreover, the findings of the study demonstrate that without church doctrine, no woman would desire to be married to a polygamous man. Compared to women in monogamous marriages, women in polygamous marriages frequently have lower educational attainment (Chikwature, 2016). As the ones who take care of the family and put food on the table, it is also typical for women in polygamous marriages to be exposed to severe situations that expose them to mental health. Women in polygamous marriages typically compete for the attention of their husbands and the shifting dynamics within the family unit that occur with the addition of a new wife. Because of the interdependence of families, males in polygamous marriages inflict many stressful changes on their wives. Typically, women having marital issues with other wives tend to become less affectionate with their kids. Other spouses experience anguish and devastation when their spouses marry another wife. Due to the pressure this development places on a man's financial resources and ability to give his wives the attention they need, it produces a significant shift in the family structure. It is likely to lower the standard of living for other wives already in place. Supporting this, Hatendi (2022), in her study, alludes that most married women in JMAC are now free from being submissive sexual and reproductive organs through the covert use of contemporary contraception. The women in JMAC should stand up for their rights and stop being toys by men.

### 3. The Survival Strategies of Women in Polygamous Marriages during COVID-19

Most of the women interviewed testified that they had empowered themselves by finding ways to cope with the stress associated with polygamous marriages, such as encouraging one another to work with their hands during the COVID-19 pandemic. This has been elaborated by one of the respondents who postulates that:

*“We are involved in the knitting of tablecloths for sale. Others do vegetable vending. All these things make our family survive in hard times like Covid-19. If you wait for the husband/father, the family will die of hunger). If you do not work hard and cook good food, the husband will not come to your house; he will go where there is nice food.”*

(Interview with Mrs. X, female, 30 years old)

The above sentiments testify how women in polygamous marriages suffered even during COVID-19 when the Nation embarked on total lockdown. Though women do not want to state it precisely, it was a tough time for women to put food on the table, and many women ended up suffering from mental health especially when they felt that they failed to provide for the family.

The study found that women suffered much stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the Nation encouraged people to stay at home, there was a need for women to go out to look for food. Again, women suffered emotional stress since the men had many partners, which made it very difficult to maintain social distance. Their husbands continued with their duty roaster, and once a member of the family in a polygamous marriage got infected with COVID-19, women were responsible for caregiving, yet the disease was highly contagious. The fact that men continued to move from one house to another alone made women more susceptible to mental health, for they were not sure if they could be spared from this ravaging pandemic of COVID-19.

One of the respondents elucidates that:

*“At one point during COVID-19 national lockdown, she was imprisoned when she woke up early in the morning to go to the market to buy vegetables to sell. She said she was accused of breaking COVID-19 curfew rules from 6 to 6. During the curfew, people were not allowed to leave before 6 am and expected to be home at 6 pm. She said the experience was terrible for her because she had left the baby at home, who was eight months old.”*

(Interview with Mrs. X, female, 35 years old)



Women were involved in risky activities during COVID-19, which subjected some of them to a lot of psychological traumas, which consequently resulted in mental health challenges. The significant stress evolved from trying to put food on the table for the family's survival.

#### 4. Effects of COVID-19 on Women's Mental Health

Even if the fatality rate has been twice as high for men than for women, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected women more than men, both as frontline workers and at-home caregivers Thibaut, F., & van Wyngarden-Cremers, P. J. (2020). Another woman in a polygamous marriage, when asked how the man managed the duty roster of satisfying the sexual needs of his wives, elucidates that:

*“She was the seventh wife, and she was in her early twenties. Despite her being highly sexually active, she testified that her husband had a year without meeting her sexual needs. The man was with another wife, claiming she had a young child. She further alluded that although the church emphasized that men should treat their wives equally, this was impossible because, in a polygamous marriage, it is impossible for a man to treat every wife fairly. Some are loved more than others, and she even suspects they use charm to win the husband's heart. (Interview with Gertrude Ngwenya”*

(Interview with Mrs. X, female 23 years old)

The above evidence shows that even before COVID-19, women in polygamous marriages suffered much stress, and the pandemic exacerbated the situation. This has been noted by Machingura (2011:17), who alluded that ‘polygamous marriages are a defilement of human rights, and such matrimony is a shame to our community for they interfere with women's rights and force them into a continuous cycle of poverty.’ Gender justice was used to challenge JMAC teachings that encourage polygamy, restrict girls' education, and force them to have early marriages, which consequently results in women's mental health since the men will be entirely in control of everything.

Although some women claimed that they are treated equally in polygamous marriages, there was an element of jealousy among the women, for they said,

*“If we want nice things, be it food or clothes, we use the young wife (The last to join the polygamy) to talk to the husband since she is the one who will still be very close to the man.”*

(Mrs. X, female 32 years old)

This alone shows that, though not precisely said, this research stresses that women suffered mental health in silence. In a normal relationship, a woman should always feel comfortable demanding what she or her children want from the husband or the father of the children at any time. No woman would like to share a man under normal circumstances.

#### Conclusion

The findings of this study clearly show that polygamous marriages in JMAC cause a lot of mental health problems for women, for they seem to lose total freedom in their lives as soon as they get married. The church's teachings oppress women more than men to the extent that even during the COVID-19 pandemic, women struggled to put food on the table and control their health because the church continued to live everyday life without paying heed to measures implemented by the government. It was through comparing experiences from both the church teachings and the responses given by the young women that this study concluded that polygamous marriages are accountable to a greater extent for causing mental health problems for women in JMAC. The study suggests that the church should not continue clinging to its old teachings that suppress the rights of women, which consequently lead to mental health challenges.

The study recommends that women in JMAC should find new ways of reading the Bible and African culture that men have used as tools to oppress them in a way that ameliorates their status. Furthermore, it is the women who have been brainwashing their children since childbirth to accept polygamy. This is the time now for women to teach their children to abandon some of the church practices that are life-denying for the

benefit of their mental health in the long run. The main argument for the study is that polygamous marriages posed a lot of mental health challenges, economically, psychologically, and socially, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The implication of the study will be for a paradigm shift in the beliefs and practices of JMAC, which encourage polygamy and result in mental health challenges during pandemics like COVID-19.

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