

Polygamy, Power, and Patriarchy: Gendered Social Mobility and Symbolic Capital in Madura's Blater Culture

Wiwik Setiyani*, Holilah, Nurhairunnisa*

Faculty of Ushuluddin and Philosophy, Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia

*Corresponding authors: wiwiksetiyani@uinsa.ac.id and nisatasrif@gmail.com

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Abstract

Polygamy in the *blater* community of Tanjungbuni, Madura, shapes women's social status through cultural, economic, and relational dynamics that sustain polygamous harmony. Adopting a qualitative approach, the research draws on in-depth interviews with 17 informants, including polygamous couples, former practitioners, non-polygamous individuals, and local community leaders. Findings show that polygamy among the *blaters* are driven by identity reinforcement, desire for descendants (especially male heirs), fulfill personal preferences, and strengthen social economic influence. These motives are tied to strategies for preserving harmony in polygamous household. Moreover, polygamy elevates the social status of wives by associating them with the prestige of the *blater* community, despite the tradition often being perceived as socially deviant in broader contexts. These insights underscore that polygamy in Tanjungbuni operates as marital arrangement and cultural mechanism through which harmony and social legitimacy are negotiated.

Keywords: Blater; Polygamy; Social Status; Wives; Tanjungbuni

1.0 Introduction

The Madurese are characterized by a distinctive social structure in which certain groups exert significant influence over social and cultural life. One of the most prominent groups is known as the *blater* community, which is recognized for its association with strength, bravery, and a role as protectors of the community. In this culture, *blater* figures command both respect and fear, as they are often linked to violence, *carok* (Maulana et al., 2024) (traditional or ritual dueling), and specific social practices, including polygamy. Moreover, polygamy is not about being understood as the practice of having multiple wives but as a symbol of social status. A *blater* who practices polygamy is perceived as possessing greater authority and influence, reinforcing the notion that polygamy serves as a social construct that legitimizes and enhances a man's position within the community.

This study aims to address the cultural, economic, and relational factors that motivate to the preservation of harmony within polygamous household in the *blater* community of Tanjungbuni, while also assessing how the position of being a blater's wife affects women's social status. By focusing on both the intra-household dynamics and broader community perceptions, the research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how polygamy functions as a marital practice and social construct that legitimizes and configures gender relations (Eisend, 2019).

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Polygamy, Power, and Patriarchy: Gendered Social Mobility and Symbolic Capital in Madura's *Blater* Culture

To achieve these objectives, the study formulates the following research questions: (1) what factors contribute to sustaining harmony within polygamous household in the *blater* community of Tanjungbuni? (2) how does the position of being a *blater*'s wife influence women's agency, well-being, and social standing? (3) To what extent does these polygamous arrangements reinforce or challenges prevailing gender hierarchy? Furthermore this study explores a fundamental question regarding the extent to which wives in *blater* polygamous marriages experience disadvantages, specifically in relation to their social standing, religious position (Azam et al., 2021), and psychological well-being.

2.0 Literature Review

A number of studies have explored issues related to *blater* figures and the practice of polygamy in Madura. Among the best is *Carok: Konflik Kekerasan dan Harga Diri Orang Madura* by (A. Latief Wiyata, 2002), which examines the role of *blater* figures within the broader context of violence and the community social system. While Wiyata's work offers valuable insights into the cultural significance of *blater* and their association with honor and conflict, it does not specifically examine the implications of polygamy on the social status of *blater*'s wives. This study seeks to fill that gap by focusing on the interaction of polygamy, gender, and social hierarchy within the *blater*.

The *Remo* tradition (Julijanti, 2023) is a ritualized practice through which members of the *blater* community express social prestige and cultivate interpersonal relationships. This ritual serves as a platform for *blater* figures to publicly display wealth and reinforce their status, which in turns confers a high degree of esteem within the community. From Madurese men's perspective, polygamy is perceived as a long-standing cultural tradition that is deeply embedded in the fabric of social life. If Jujiyanti et al. highlight the diverse perspective on polygamy between its practitioners and non-practitioners, the present study interprets polygamy as an enduring patriarchal practice that contributes to the marginalization of women.

In contrast, the study *Menabur Karisma, Menuai Kuasa* by (Rozaki, 2022) explores the social background and power dynamics associated with *blater* figures. While this research offers valuable insight into how *blaters* exercise their authority and influence in society, it does not directly address the practice of polygamy. Rather, it provides a broader understanding of the ways in which *blater* leverage their social capital, without explicitly examining how polygamy functions within this framework.

Polygamy continues to be a controversial topic, debated through different interpretations of Islamic Teaching. In *Pro dan Kontra Poligami di Indonesia dalam Perspektif Islam* (Maulida et al., 2022), Maulida et al. gave their opinions about this issue, showing that polygamy remains a source of ongoing disagreement in Indonesia. This is one of the reasons why this research is critically focused on religious leaders' role in the *blater* at Tanjungbuni. The question is how religious figures contribute in normalizing the practice of *polygamy*, either by supporting it or by remaining silent, despite its negative impact on women.

An equally significant inquiry pertains to the legal basis and procedures for polygamy in Indonesia (Erizka Permatasari, 2023): especially in Tanjungbuni, Madura. Although polygamy is legally permitted, it is subject to specific conditions to be recognized as lawful. The framework is essential for analyzing how the *blater* community's polygamous practices align-or conflict-with state regulations and national legal standards.

From an academic perspective, this research offers a novel contribution to sociology and gender by illustrating that, in specific socio-cultural contexts, polygamy does not necessarily result in disadvantages for women when analyzed through a social lens. However, from a policy standpoint, it is imperative for policymakers to formulate more comprehensive and effective regulation addressing polygamy and ensuring the protection of women's rights within traditional communities. The persistence of customary laws and cultural traditions that disproportionately disadvantage women, as observed in various cases, including

within the *blater* community in Bangkalan, Madura—underscores the need for legal and institutional reforms to promote gender equity.

3.0 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative method (Taylor et al., 2015) with a case study approach to examine polygamy in the *blater* community and its impact on women's social status. The research involved 17 even more informants, including five actively polygamous couples, one formerly polygamous couple, one monogamous couple, and two community leaders. All interviews were conducted by the author from April to July in 2025. Informant names are anonymized or used with consent. The meta data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and literature review. Analysis followed three stages: (1) data reduction to identify key themes, (2) data presentation in a narrative format, and (3) conclusion drawing based on sociological and patriarchal theories (Zuhrah, 2017). Social, cultural, and economic factors (approach) in this study aims to provide a clearer understanding of the dynamics of polygamy and its effects on women, both within the household and in the broader social structure.

Judith Butler's gender Performativity Theory (1990) is used to analyze polygamy as a social construct. Additionally, Max Weber's theory of social status (1922) helps examine power dynamics in *blater* marriages, showing how authority and dominance shape relationships within the community. Butler's framework explores how women in the *blater* show their roles within a patriarchal system and how polygamy persists as part of their social identity.

4.0 Result and Discussion

The data collected from interviews and field observations were categorized according to their relevance to the research objectives. Data that directly reflect the dynamics of polygamy in the *blater* community of Tanjungbumi were included, while those that fell outside the cultural and social framework under study were excluded. The following table presents the categorization of inclusion and exclusion data used in this research.

Table 1

Inclusion (<i>Rellevant Data</i>)	Exclusion (<i>Irrelevant Data</i>)
Testimonies from blater wives and men regarding motives, social status, and cultural legitimacy of polygamy.	Testimonies from non-blater individuals unrelated to polygamous practices.
Perspectives from community leaders and religious figures affirming or normalizing polygamy in Tanjungbumi.	Opinions or discourses from communities outside Madura with no direct context.
Observations of economic, cultural, and legal practices specific to the blater community.	General national debates or legal discussions not grounded in local practice.

The analysis remains firmly grounded in empirical realities observed within the *blater* community. By distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant data, the study emphasizes the cultural, social, and economic factors that uniquely shape the practice of polygamy in Tanjungbumi, while avoiding overgeneralization from unrelated contexts.

4.1 Cultural Norms and the Strengthening of Polygamy in the Blater Community

Although polygamy (Syamsuddin, 2018) is often critiqued in academic discourse for its potential to perpetuate gender equality—whether emotionally, socially, or economically (Shaiful Bahari et al., 2021), the empirical realities within the *blater* community present a distinct socio-cultural dynamic. In Tanjungbumi,

**Polygamy, Power, and Patriarchy:
Gendered Social Mobility and Symbolic Capital in Madura's *Blater* Culture**

Bangkalan, polygamous marriages are characterized by relative harmony, with wives demonstrating acceptance of the arrangement without significant conflict. According to the local, Lana, within this community, polygamy is not merely a marital practice but an entrenched cultural norm. Among the *blater*, having multiple wives is regarded as a marker of “*blater* identity” and a symbol of social prestige. The elevated social status of *blater* men legitimizes polygamy not only as an accepted custom but also as an assertion of power and social dominance.

Notably, the social status of women who marry *blater* men tends to improve. Unlike in many other societies, where second or subsequent wives in polygamous unions are often perceived as subordinate, the *blater* community accords these women greater protection and social recognition (Syafitri & Fauzi, 2021). This phenomenon is rooted in *blater*'s position as a dominant social and political group, wherein their wives are automatically integrated into elite strata of society. Thus, polygamy within the *blater* community extends beyond the realm of domestic relationships; it is deeply embedded in a broader socio-political structure that reinforces power hierarchies and status dynamics within the community.

Informants substantiate these findings, Moh. Ilyas, a respected community leader in Tanjungbumi, highlighted that “*although blater men are associated with negative behaviors, they hold significant social status within the community. As a result, many women are eager to marry a blater. In our community, a woman who becomes the wife of a blater is automatically perceived as having a higher social standing, even if she previously held no notable status*” This perspective was echoed by another informant, Sarmila, the fourth wife of Adussalam, who stated, “*marrying a blater has elevated my social status and increased the respect I receive in the community, even as a fourth wife. In other societies, polygamous wives are often stigmatized as mistresses, but here.... I take pride in marriage because it is legally recognized and registered with the Religious Affairs (KUA).*”

There are some factors that reinforce the practice of polygamy within this community. *First*, polygamy serves as a symbol of *blater* identity and status, where the number of wives a man has directly correlates with his perceived power and influence. This suggests that polygamy is not about a personal preference but a deeply embedded social construction that legitimizes an individual's authority within the *blater* hierarchy. *Second*, the perception that having many offspring signifies strength and prestige plays a crucial role in sustaining these practices. As claimed by Moh. Misyan, a *blater* with a large number of children, particularly male heirs, is seen as possessing greater social legitimacy and influence. This belief is reinforced by H. Suje'i, a *blater* who has had over 40 wives throughout his lifetime. In an interview, he remarked, “*I married multiple women because I wanted to have many children. There is a saying: 'the more children, the more blessings.' I take pride in my family, to the point where I have lost count of how many children I actually have.*”

This case illustrates how polygamy within the *blater* community is not a domestic arrangement but a mechanism for consolidating social status, power, and lineage. Unlike conventional critiques of polygamy that emphasize its detrimental effects on women, it reveals a distinct socio-cultural framework in which polygamy functions as a legitimizing institution (Child, 2019) that elevates men and women within their community's social hierarchy.

Poverty (Seligson & McCants, 2022) is another significant factor that contributes to the perpetuation of polygamy within the *blater* community. Economic hardship limits women's opportunities for financial independence, making marriage particularly to be a *blater*—one of the few viable means of securing economic stability. Ilyas said that in many cases, women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds view marriage to *blater* as a strategic decision that ensures financial security and social elevation. The reputation and influence associated with *blater* men offer women and their families a form of economic and social protection that might otherwise be unattainable. Consequently, polygamy emerged as a pragmatic response to economic precarity, rather than solely a cultural or religious preference.

Many *blater* men possess substantial economic resources, enabling them to support multiple wives without financial strain. Women are more inclined to accept polygamous arrangements when financial security is guaranteed. Additionally, their social status within the community is elevated, as they become part of families that hold considerable wealth and influence. The intersection between economic power and social hierarchy (Wietmarschen & Han Van Wietmarschen, 2022) in legitimizing polygamous practices. As a prominent figure, Moh. Ilyas, affirm this by saying that “*many blater men practice polygamy because they are wealthy, allowing them to fully provide for their wives.*”

4.2 Shift in the Social Status and Empowerment of Women in a Fragmented Society

Despite the widespread social acceptance of polygamy within the *blater* community, the practice remains deeply embedded in patriarchal structures (Bell & Pei, 2022). Women continue to occupy a subordinate position within a male-dominated social framework, where the decision to enter a polygamous marriage is determined solely by the husband. Gender equality in marital decision-making remains a significant challenge, as women’s agency in choosing or rejecting polygamy is constrained by cultural expectations.

On another personal meeting, Moh. Misyan claimed that, “*Sometimes, women and their families cannot refuse a blater’s marriage proposal due to fear. When a blater marries a woman, her entire family perceives it as a source of protection and security.*” While woman marrying a *blater* they confer social prestige, it does not necessarily afford her greater autonomy.

In some cases, women and their families experience limited freedom in rejecting a *blater*’s marriage proposal. Often due to social-cultural pressure and security considerations. This illustrates how women are often coerced into marriage due to social and economic pressures (Seligson & McCants, 2022): 10), rather than personal choice. As long as marriage remains an arrangement dictated by male authority and family expectations, women’s ability to make independent decisions about their personal and marital lives is severely restricted.

The shift in the social status and women empowerment (Tasrif et al., 2022) in a fragmented society remains a complex issue, particularly within patriarchy communities such as the *blater* people. While marriage to a *blater* may enhance a woman’s perceived social prestige, it does not necessarily lead to greater agency or empowerment. Empirical evidence from the informant interviews suggest that women’s choices regarding marriage and social mobility are heavily influenced by cultural norms, economic, dependence, and societal pressures, rather than genuine autonomy.

These findings illustrate the intricate relationship between economic stability, social mobility (Andari et al., 2023), and patriarchal authority in sustaining polygamy. According to Sylvia Walby’s model of patriarchy (Walby, 2013), At least there are six key structures that contribute to maintenance of male dominance: the domestic mode of production, paid employment relations, culture, sexuality, violence, and the state. Within this community, women remain confined to domestic roles and lack full autonomy on marital decision-making, particularly in the context of polygamy. The decision to marry a *blater* is often not a result of female agency but rather a consequence of social and economic pressures that compel them to conform to the patriarchal system. Women’s economic dependence on men further reinforces this structure, as many accept polygamy as a means of protection and stability despite it not necessarily granting them greater freedom.

The patriarchal culture within the *blater* community establishes norms that position women in a subordinate role, where polygamy is not only deemed acceptable but also confers social status. However, this status does not equate to genuine empowerment; rather, it serves as a mechanism to sustain male dominance (Andari et al., 2023) control over women’s sexuality further entrenched patriarchy, as women often lack the freedom to accept or reject marriage proposals due to social pressures and fear of the consequences of refusing a *blater*, the norm of violence present in this community is also structural, as women and their families often feel coerced into accepting polygamy to avoid social stigma or other forms of threat.

Polygamy, Power, and Patriarchy: Gendered Social Mobility and Symbolic Capital in Madura's *Blater* Culture

Moreover, the role of the state in perpetuating patriarchy must be considered. If the legal framework fails to explicitly prohibit or regulate polygamy and do not provide adequate protection for women seeking to reject coerced marriages, the state effectively reinforces the patriarchy system. Therefore, the shifting social status of women within the *blater* community requires a critical and nuanced examination. While marriage to a *blater* may elevate a woman's perceived social standing, it does not inherently equate to increased agency or empowerment.

Women remain constrained within a socio-cultural framework that limits their ability to make independent choices (Walby, 2013) regarding their personal and marital lives. Genuine transformation can only be achieved through structural changes that provide women with greater access to economic independence, autonomy in marital decision-making, and robust legal protections enforced by the state (Zeitzen, 2008). Addressing these systems is essential to ensuring that women's social mobility rooted in is not contingent upon their marital status, but is instead rooted in broader opportunities for self-determination and equal participation in society.

According to the Bureau of Statistics (BPS) 2024, the labor force participation rate of women in rural areas is only 47%, compared to 76% for men (BPS-Statistic Indonesia, 2022). Meanwhile, a study by the Ministry of women's empowerment and child protection also reveals that only 35% of women in communities that practice polygamy pursue higher education (Erizka Permatasari, 2023). Meanwhile, A 2023 UN Women reports that 60% of women (UN Women, 2023) in highly patriarchal societies lack adequate access to reproductive health services, further weakening their ability to make critical decisions about their own lives.

Local surveys indicate that only 20% of women in polygamous marriages have control over their family's economic decision. Social pressure and the threat of stigma against those who reject such marriages further restrict women's ability to achieve economic and social independence. Therefore, economic opportunities, and legal protections, are essential to achieving gender equality in a society still bound by patriarchal norms (Romli, 2017).

H. Su'e states that, *"I want to have many children, because the more children I have, the more blessings I have from Allah SWT."* This perspective reinforces the notion that polygamy serves as a mechanism for expanding a *blater*'s influence, with women's reproductive roles being central to maintaining and increasing male social standing. The fact that, the *blater* traditional marriage simultaneously limits women's autonomy, as they are expected to conform to social expectations regarding childbearing and family structures, often with a little control over their productive choices.

In our personal meeting with the locals, Martolo said that, *"Blaters are feared and respected. Even if their wives were from ordinary backgrounds, it is simple to gain their status by being married to blater, but it does not mean that they have more rights or freedom."* These statements illustrate the paradox of social mobility, where women are experiencing a shift in public perception but remain constrained within a male-dominated framework. The fear of stigma, social pressure (Galieva, 2021), and coercion prevents women from challenging traditional gender roles, ensuring that they continue to accept their subordinate position.

True women's empowerment in the *blater* community is impossible under the current system, as women remain dependent to male authority for financial security, social status, and decision-making power. Without legal protections (Walby, 2013), especially in unregistered polygamous marriages they lack rights and opportunities employment, independence, and education, keeping them trapped in a patriarchal structure. Real empowerment requires major changes, a better access in all elements including financial independence and legal safeguard, alongside government intervention.

Another possible solution that can be implemented is that cultural norms must be reformed through comprehensive awareness programs that advocate gender equality and challenge deeply rooted patriarchal structures (Smith, 2025). Without these fundamental transformations, women will always experience an

apparent elevation in social status through *blater* marriage; however, genuine autonomy and empowerment will remain unattainable unless they are granted the opportunity to define their roles. *Blater* women have to be actively engaged in all aspects, especially in economic and political life.

4.3 Power Dynamics in polygamy and the Autonomy of Women

Polygamous marriage within the *blater* exemplifies a complex interplay of power (Julijanti, 2020). Male dominance is institutionally reinforced, and female autonomy is significantly constrained. The *blater*, a social group characterized by their socio-political influence and traditional authority, often regard polygamy as a mechanism for consolidating power and prestige. This cultural construct (Zeitzen, 2008) not only dictates marital arrangements but also profoundly shapes the agency societal positioning of women within these unions.

Empirical findings derived from qualitative interviews with *blater* men and their wives illustrate that polygamy operates as a multi-faceted institution, serving various socio-economic and political functions. Other *blater* actors, Falah, articulated that his polygamous lifestyle was primarily driven by personal reference rather than assertion of power. Nonetheless, societal norms continue to associate his marital patterns with his stature as a *blater* figure. Another polygamous *blater* man H. Monari, states that, to ensure lineage continuity and expand his familia network, further solidifying his influence within the community. These rationalizations, while diverse, collectively reinforce the overarching patriarchal framework that governs the institution of polygamy within the *blater* social order.

The experience of women in *blater* marriages reflect a nuanced reality wherein an elevation in social status is juxtaposed with a reduction in personal autonomy. Thoyyibah, the Second wife of H. Monari, acknowledged that her marriage to a *blater* leader conferred that sustaining this status necessitated compliance with polygamous norms, thereby limiting her agency. This paradox underscores the inherent structural inequalities embedded within such marital arrangements. Community leaders in Tanjungbuni corroborated this perspective, asserting that women who marry into *blater* households inevitably acquire higher social standing, irrespective of their consent to polygamous practices.

In the theoretical standpoint Judith Butler's (MacLaran, 2017) method of gender performativity provides an insightful lens through which to analyze these dynamics. Butler posits that gender roles are not biologically determined but rather constructed and reinforced through repetitive social behaviors. In the context of *blater* polygamous marriages, women's participation in prescribed roles—marked by obedience, deference, and domestic servitude serves to perpetuate patriarchal hegemony. Their acceptance of polygamy, often misconstrued as voluntary, is in reality a socially conditioned response shaped by generational norms (Rozaki, 2022) and cultural expectations. This performativity sustains the unequal distribution of power and reinforces a rigid gender hierarchy that systematically subordinates women (Amis et al., 2020).

According to H. Monari, beyond the marital domain, patriarchal structures in *blater* society exert influence on broader socio-political dynamics. The expectation that women must acquiesce to their husbands' decisions, including the acceptance of additional co-wives, is deeply ingrained within the prevailing gender order. Community leaders emphasize that women who resist polygamous unions risk social ostracization or economic vulnerability, further demonstrating the coercive mechanisms that sustain male dominance. This dynamic aligns with Judith Butler's broader assertion that gender is not an inherent trait but a socially regulated construct that dictates power relations.

While financial security and elevated social status may serve as incentives for women to accept polygamy (Maulida et al., 2022), such motivations do not negate the broader structural limitations imposed by patriarchy, which continue to restrict their agency in marital and familial decision-making. This underscores the need for a more nuanced analysis of polygamy, one that accounts for socio-economic advantages it may offer and systemic gender inequalities it perpetuates.

Polygamy, Power, and Patriarchy: Gendered Social Mobility and Symbolic Capital in Madura's *Blater* Culture

The interaction of poverty and polygamy in the *blater* community reflects broader structural issues, where limited access to education, employment, and economic opportunities for women sustains reliance on marriage as a primary means of social mobility. This dynamic underscores more critical examination of the socio-economic conditions that contribute to the persistence of polygamy, highlighting the necessity of policies that promote women's economic empowerment and access to resources beyond the institution of marriage.

From the perspective of women, acknowledges that marrying a *blater* has conferred social benefits, yet the locals called Halimah, also emphasizes the constraints that persist regarding female empowerment. She acknowledges the symbolic gains of marrying *blater*, "*I agree when people say that marrying a blater will raise women's social status, because I feel more respected now, even though I am the fifth wife. In our community, being a blater's wife means you are protected.*" Her narrative foregrounds the benefits of protection and enhanced recognition, yet remains silent on issues of autonomy or financial independence. This silence is analytically significant, it demonstrates how improved social status does not necessarily dismantle the structural constraints imposed by patriarchy. In line with Kandiyoti's (1988) notion that women may accept symbolic gains while continuing to operate within a framework that limits their agency.

4.4 Legal Landscape of Polygamy in Indonesia

The legal landscape (Erizka Permatasari, 2023) further complicates the issue of female autonomy in polygamous marriages. Indonesian law mandates specific prerequisites for polygamy, including demonstrable justification and the explicit consent of the existing wife (Zuhrah, 2017). However, within the *blater* community, these legal provisions are frequently circumvented, with many polygamous marriages conducted informally and devoid of legal registration.

This lack of legal recognition disproportionately disadvantages women, depriving them of economic rights, inheritance claims (Maulida et al., 2022), and legal recourse in case of abandonment or domestic disputes. Interviews with some affected women suggest that while they are cognizant of these vulnerabilities, they often remain in polygamous marriages due to entrenched societal pressures and financial dependency.

On the other hand, Thoyyibah, sharing her point of view that the Power dynamics in *blater* polygamous marriages thus underscore a systemic imbalance wherein men consolidate control through economic leverage, social influence, and cultural norms. Although women may experience an ostensible rise in social prestige, their agency is fundamentally compromised within a structure that prioritizes male authority. Butler's theoretical framework elucidates how these gendered roles are maintained through performative acts, reinforcing the notion that polygamous marriages in *blater* society are less a matter of individual choice and more a consequence of deeply embedded gendered expectations.

The intersection of cultural tradition, legal constraints, (Trigiyatno et al., 2023) and gendered hierarchies shows that genuine female autonomy within these marriages remains an elusive goal. When other women express relative satisfaction with their marital status, their lived realities reflect an underlying system that perpetuates gender subordination. The continued prevalence of polygamy as a marker of status among *blater* men serves to sustain power asymmetries (Rozaki, 2022), gender norms (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020) and fostering greater agency for women within these traditional systems.

Polygamy in Indonesia is regulated under the Marriage Law No. 1 of 1974 and the Compilation of Islamic Law (KHI), which impose conditions such as court approval, financial capability, and the consent of the first wife. Yet, in practice, these stipulations are frequently bypassed through unregistered "*nikah siri*". Such informal arrangements deprive wives and children of legal recognition, producing structural vulnerabilities with respect to inheritance, maintenance and domestic protection (Zuhrah, 2017; Permatasari, 2023). This disjuncture shows how statutory law is often subordinated to local cultural legitimacies that privilege male authority.

Within the *blater* community, polygamy is embedded less in juridical compliance than in the pursuit of prestige and symbolic capital. Legal registration, when pursued, is valued not for its protective function but for its capacity to enhance masculine status and confer legitimacy upon the household. Women, meanwhile, are positioned ambivalently, their social standing may rise as the wives of *blaters*, yet their substantive legal rights remain fragile. This paradox flex how law can operate simultaneously as an instrument of recognition and as a mechanism that sustains gendered inequities (Maulida et al., 2022).

The implication is that Indonesian legal frameworks, while ostensibly restrictive, are undermined by weak enforcement and the dominance of patriarchal norms. The intersection of state law, Islamic law, and customary practice generates a contested legal field in which women are systematically disadvantaged. In the case of the *blater* community, the law's objectification into normal procedures fails to interpret into internalized gender protections, demonstrating the limited capacity of legal reform to dismantle entrenched cultural (Setiyani, 2020; Nasution, 2018) hierarchies. Indeed, local wisdom such as the practice of *blater* polygamy operates within its own symbolic order, largely impervious to intervention either by state law or Islamic jurisprudence, thereby reinforcing its autonomy as a cultural institution. Yet, this autonomy also creates a complex dilemma, for while it preserves local honor, it simultaneously entrenches gender inequality.

4.5 Perception Vs Reality: Social Status of Women in Polygamous Households

Women's position in society has continuously dynamic and progressive transformation (Summer et al., 2024) throughout history. This evolution reflects a growing acknowledgement of women's right, dignity, and authority across domains where they were historically excluded and marginalized. At this point, women's empowerment denotes the expansion of women's agency, autonomy, and decision-making power over their personal and public lives. It embodies a comprehensive advancement in their civil liberties, socio-political influence, and capacity to shape the structures that affect them.

The finding of this study shows a bifurcation within the *blater* community, those who endorse the tradition of polygamy and those who reject it. This ideological split signifies a socially stratified community, segmented along cultural, political, and socio-religious lines. Such fragmentation underscores the existence of intersecting social groups, differentiated by gender and class with unequal access to power and privilege.

Public perception frequently portrays women in polygamous households as occupying subordinate positions, constrained by structural limitations and subjected to gender-based violence. Nevertheless, this assumption does not universally correspond empirically. Social positioning of women within polygamous family structures is shaped by complex dynamics of power relations (Zeitzen, 2008), role negotiations, and cultural constructions (Jahar et al., 2022). Its complexity challenges monolithic assumptions and more nuanced understanding of gender relations within plural marital arrangements.

A persistent stigma surrounds women in polygamous marriages, portraying them as marginalized figures—experiencing emotional distress, jealousy, and lack of agency. As Halimah said that, women who consent to such arrangements are perceived as weak, submissive, or resigned to the “fate” lacking the strength to resist their husbands' will. Mar'om and Bunayyah—two women engaged in polygamous unions—challenge this dominant narrative and show more nuanced reality. Mar'om reflects on her initial reaction to her husband's decision: “*At first, it was very difficult, I had to accept it as my fate. But after all, we must protect the family's reputation.*” She describes feeling deeply hurt and emotionally overwhelmed at the outset. By the time she learned to navigate her feelings of jealousy and came to accept the situation, framing it as part of her role and responsibility as the first wife.

Although Mar'om's statement appears at first glance to reproduce passive conformity, it in fact conveys a calculated negotiation within patriarchal boundaries. By articulating her compliance in the language of familial honor, she recast obedience as a socially valorized act, positioning herself not as subordinate wife but as a custodian of moral capital whose role is indispensable to the preservation of communal legitimacy.

**Polygamy, Power, and Patriarchy:
Gendered Social Mobility and Symbolic Capital in Madura's *Blater* Culture**

In this reframing, the dominant narrative of female passivity is subtly unsettled. Mar'om shows that reflexive agency: her acceptance is neither silent nor uncritical but strategically oriented toward sustaining the family's symbolic standing within society. As Kandiyoti's (1988) notion of "Bargaining with Patriarchy" suggests, such responses exemplify women's capacity to reconfigure structural subordination into a socially consequential form of agency.

Bunayyah articulates a comparable viewpoint. Rather than perceiving herself as marginalized, she regards her position as the first wife as a source of significant social capital within the community. She asserts that she continues to be viewed as the central figure in the family's structure—both in the society and by her husband. The respect she receives is largely attributed to her capacity to uphold familial cohesion and stability amidst the practice of polygamy within the community.

Weber (2023) conceptualized social status in three dimensions: power, class, and prestige. Within the *blater*, women's social status is shaped by their proximity to power and prevailing structures of dominance. It means that, polygamy can be interpreted as a socio-cultural strategy for status enhancement for men who increase their number of wives, and for women who choose marriage with a *blater* men, viewing the union as a symbol of elevated social standing, with the community. Yet, the question is, what are the underlying social realities embedded in the practice of polygamy within the *blater* community?

Rudi, a *blater* who engages in polygamous marriage, offers insight from a male perspective. His decision to take a second wife is informed by a range of socio-cultural considerations. For the informant, polygamy is not about personal gratification, but rather a strategic endeavor aimed at expanding social networks and fulfilling local customary expectations associated with his identity as a *blater*. As Rudi stated, "*polygamy is not just about desire (sexuality); it's about how to maintain kinship ties, preserving harmony within the extended family, and sometimes responding to familial requests.*"

Other *blater* figures emphasize that all his wives (the first and the second wives) hold equally significant roles in sustaining familial stability, emotionally, socially, and economically. According to Martolo's experience, the decision to engage in polygamy is not made arbitrarily; rather it involves a deliberation process with the extended family and careful consideration of the well-being of all parties. Based on Walby's perspectives, six structures of patriarchy including household relations, economic system, and cultural representation (Walby, 2003)—are pertinent for understanding how women within the community internalize and adapt to the practice of polygamy.

Polygamy may seem fair and cooperative, but they take place within a larger system where men hold more power in family and society. While shared roles and family harmony can suggest equality, based on Walbys' it often hides the unequal power relationships at play. In the *blater* community, man has the main authority to decide to collect more than one wife, and this choice is supported by tribal custom for their role. On the other hand, women are expected to support their family emotionally, socially, and economically. This reflects Walby's idea of private patriarchy, where men have authority to control family life, and once again, their power is supported by cultural and social traditions, where men lead and women are the followers. It shows how patriarchy can be maintained through an accepted cultural system.

"Private patriarchy" happens mainly in the home. This structure puts men as a husband or father who has direct control over wives or women's role, freedom and work. Private patriarchy is common in traditional or pre-industrial societies, where women are expected to stay at home and have a responsibility to take care of the family. On one hand, "Public patriarchy" takes place in the wider society or institution—through systems like government, work place, education, and the media. Women still face unfair treatment in their institution where they work and study. And, this is more common in modern societies, where gender inequality is built into institutions rather than just the household.

People who experience polygamy are highly varied. For instance, one *blater* figure, who had polygamy, now decided to live with his first wife after divorcing the second. He acknowledges that the practice of polygamy is far more complex than commonly assumed. It entails navigating social pressures, internal familia conflicts, and economic burdens, all of which can undermine the harmony of the family.

Based on Fajri who said that, “*as time went on, I realized it is better to have only one wife. It is not easy to divide one’s affection and attention.*” This personal reflection shows that polygamy within the community has significant consequences. It underscores the reality that power relations and elevated social status do not necessarily ensure domestic harmony. In many cases, women continue to bear the emotional burden and psychological trauma resulting from marital arrangements, showing the gendered asymmetric that persist within polygamouse household.

Back to Walby, the social system of men in a dominant role over women. This is vividly illustrated in the traditional *blater* structure, which places male *blater* figures in dominant roles across social, religious, economic, and cultural spheres. Polygamy within the *blater* system clearly demonstrates a tangible form of patriarchy, in which men hold full control over marriage decisions and family structures (Walby, 2013), while women remain in subordinate position as explained in following diagram:

Table 1.
Result analysis about Polygamy in *blater* with Walby’s Approach

The concept of Patriarchy	Walby’s Approach	Polygamy Custom in <i>Blater</i>
<i>Private Patriarchy</i>	Male domination (control) in the household	<i>Blater</i> men authority in choosing and organizing polygamy (-ous marriage)
<i>Public Patriarchy</i>	Male domination in institution	Blater status gives public validation to male-centric family practices
<i>The relations</i>	Shows how patriarchy operates across social domains	Cultural norms reinforce male power in both domestic and public spheres
<i>Conclusion</i>	Walby’s framework sees how gender inequality is maintained not just through personal decisions , but through broader cultural and institutional reinforcement. While, in the case of the <i>blater</i> community, polygamy functions as a site where private and public patriarchy converge , ensuring that male dominance is not only normalized —but also celebrated .	

From the perspective of individual freedom, polygamy can be viewed as a fundamental human right, an expression of personal autonomy. Some people choose not to engage polygamy relationships for some reasons, reflecting diverse interpretations of the concept and practice of polygamy. For instance, Masri and the couple Marsudeh and Martolo give perspectives that challenge dominant narratives. Masri, a *blater* who has chosen to remain monogamous into old age, rejects the notion that polygamy is a requisite marker of masculine honor among Madurese men. For the informant, familial stability and domestic harmony take precedence over social recognition.

“*For me, being a blater is not about how many women you marry. It is about being respected for maintaining a whole and intact family, and for our function and contribution within society. Being directly involved in helping the community is far more dignified than justifying polygamy under the pretense of improving the economic or social status of married women*” claimed Marsudeh, a local *blater* who share her perspectives. The sentiment is echoed by his wife, who assert that women are not passive subjects in marital relationships, but rather equal partners who must be respected. Together, the couple emphasizes that family harmony can be achieved without resorting to polygamy, as long as there is mutual respect, open and reciprocal communication, and a shared commitment to preserving the relationship.

Polygamy, Power, and Patriarchy: Gendered Social Mobility and Symbolic Capital in Madura's *Blater* Culture

It suggests that the widespread portrayal of women in polygamous marriages solely as victims is overly simplistic (Tharu & Niranjana, 2019). Practically, women possess agency and the capacity to negotiate their social positioning, even within polygamous structures. Thus, polygamy within the *blater* must be understood as a socially complex phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a singular narrative. The tension between perception and lived reality illustrates the intricate dynamics of power, gender, and tradition.

In the end, the social status of polygamous wives is not homogenous, it is shaped by cultural, economic, power relations, and individual capacity for managing interpersonal dynamics. In *blater*, women in polygamous marriages attain social recognition, serve as role models, and independently manage household economies. Conversely, polygamy does not always yield favorable outcomes for men. Emotionally conflict, marital discord, social tensions, and even divorce may arise as consequences of an inability to sustain a healthy polygamous household. These outcomes underscore the challenges inherent in managing complex familial arrangements within a polygamous framework.

5.0 Conclusion

Polygamy in the *blater* community in Tanjungbuni, Madura, is not only about marital arrangement but a cultural construct signifying power, social status, and masculine identity. This study shows that wives of *blater* figures experience an elevation in social standing due to their association with prominent, respected men in the community. However, such elevation does not equate to genuine empowerment. Instead, polygamy serves to reinforce patriarchal structures, where men retain full control over marital decisions, and women often enter these unions not by free choice but under socioeconomic and cultural pressures.

Despite the narrative that women in polygamous marriages gain protection and social prestige, empirically, their autonomy remains significantly constrained. Through the theoretical lenses of Sylvia Walby's patriarchal approach and Butler's gender narrative, performativity, the findings demonstrate how cultural systems and power relations perpetuate male dominance and systematically limit women's rights. True transformation demands structural reform-legally, economically, and culturally, so that women are not only symbolically elevated through marriage, but are genuinely empowered with autonomy, agency, and equal access to opportunities.

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