

Polygamy is spreading in PNG

by Kingtau Mambon and Stephen Howes

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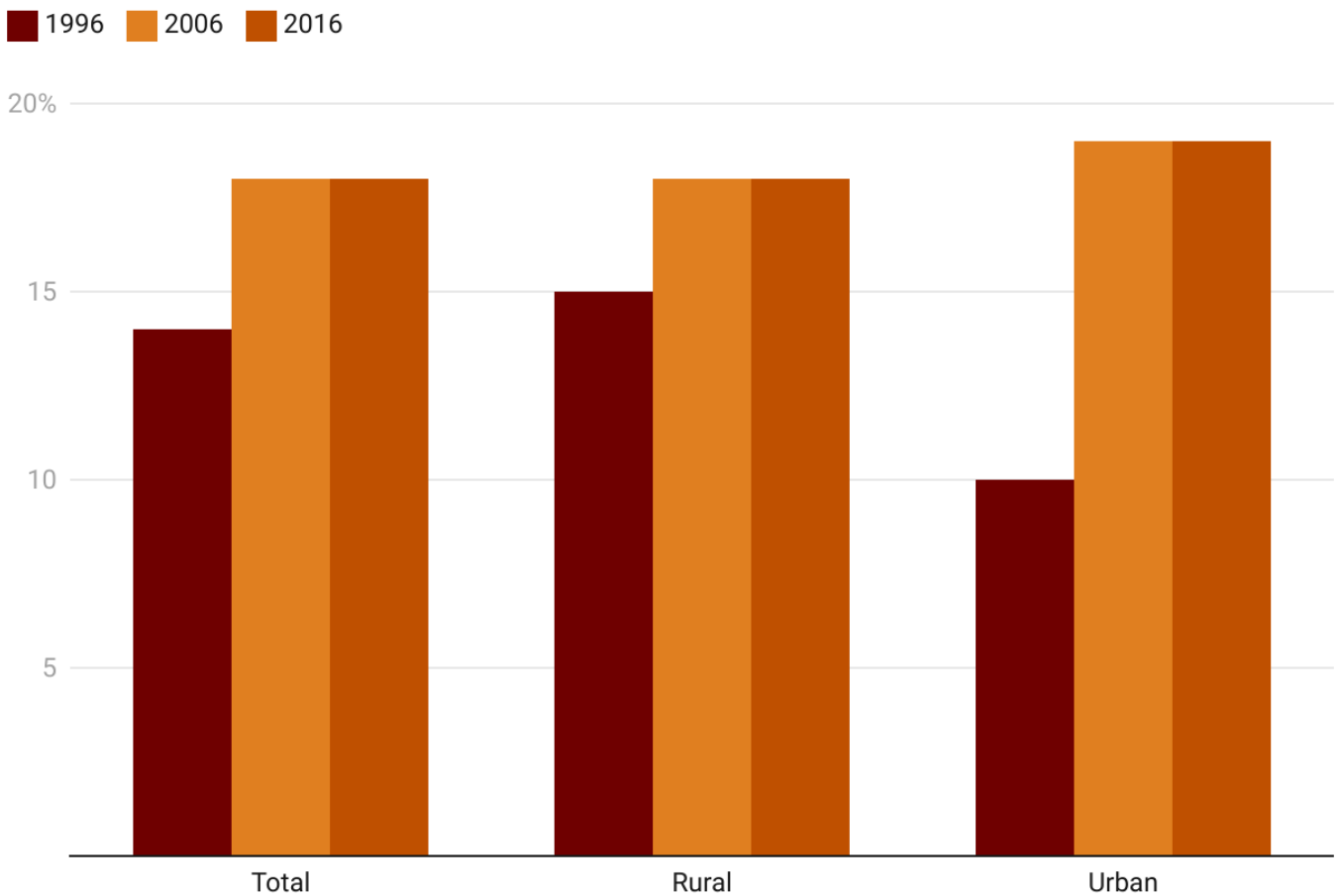
In Papua New Guinea, the proliferation of social problems related to polygamous marriages has led to [one social justice advocate](#) calling polygamy a “social evil”. It certainly leads to some serious problems. [65% of PNG’s female prisoners](#) are convicted of a crime related to polygamous marriages, specifically, the murder of a fellow wife. Julie Soso, a female politician, [proposed a bill](#) in 2012 to outlaw polygamous marriages. In 2014, [the Civil Registration Act](#) was amended to make “bigamous or polyandrous” (*sic*) customary marriages illegal. (Polygamous formal marriages were already outlawed.)

Despite this, polygamous marriages, once concentrated in particular parts of the country and among particular social groupings, are becoming increasingly widespread in PNG. In this blog, we discuss five trends in polygamy based on the three Demographic and Health Surveys (DHSs) that have been carried out in PNG over the last 30 years: in 1996, 2006 and 2016-18 (referred to here as 2016).

First, the total share of married women in a polygamous relationship increased between 1996 and 2006 from 14% to 18%, and then stabilised between 2006 and 2016 (see Figure 1).

Second, and also as shown in Figure 1, polygamy used to be much more concentrated in rural areas. Now, it is equally prevalent in urban areas. Urban areas saw an increase of 9 percentage points in the proportion of women engaging in polygamous marriages (almost a doubling), compared to a 3 percentage point increase in rural areas since 1996.

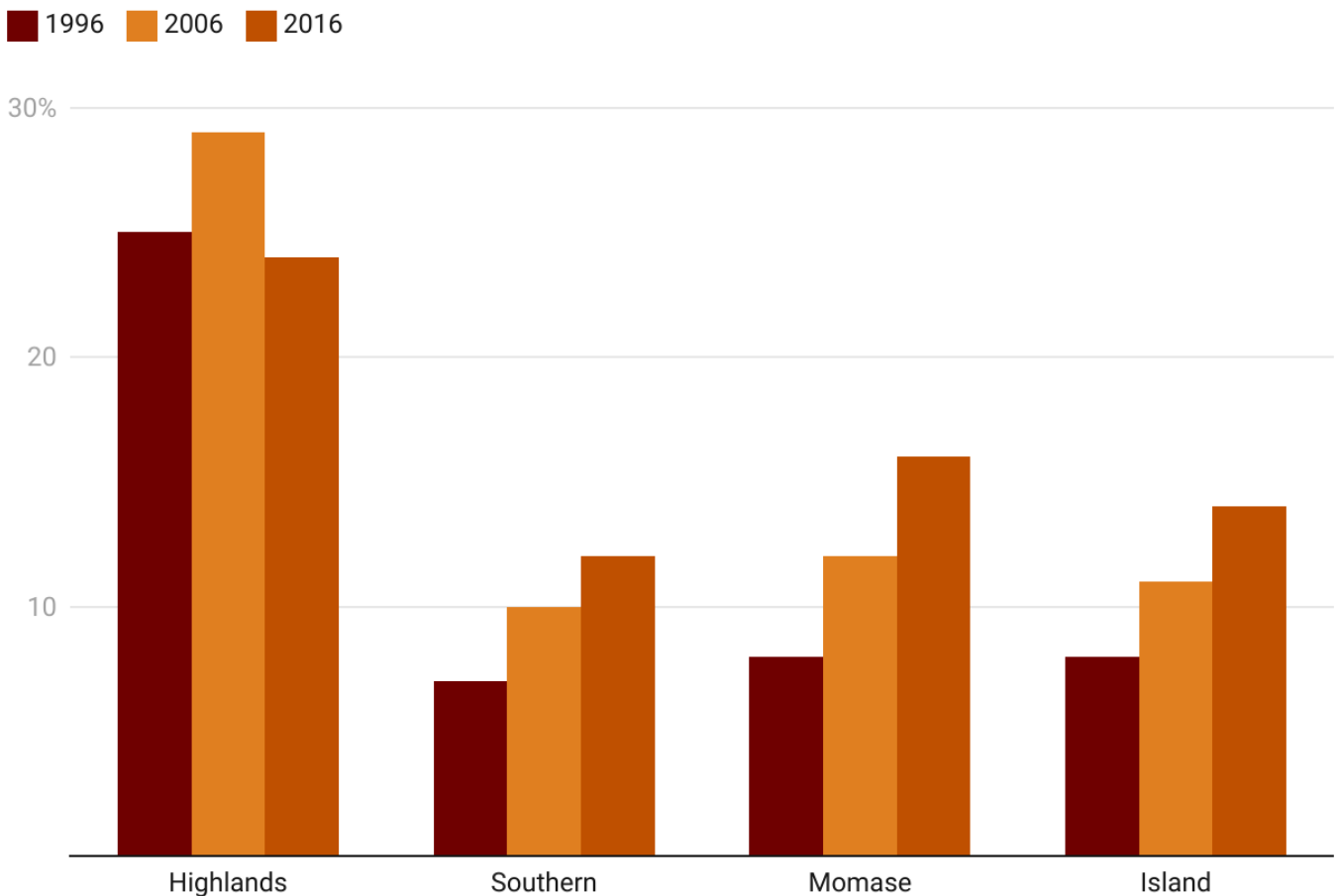
Figure 1: Percentage of PNG women in polygamous marriages by residence



Source: The DHS Program • Created with Datawrapper

Third, since 1996, polygamy has become less concentrated in the Highlands, and more of a national phenomenon. The three coastal regions traditionally known for monogamous marriages show a notable upward trend in polygamous marriages (Figure 2). In contrast, in the Highlands region, the share of women in polygamous marriages has stayed about constant.

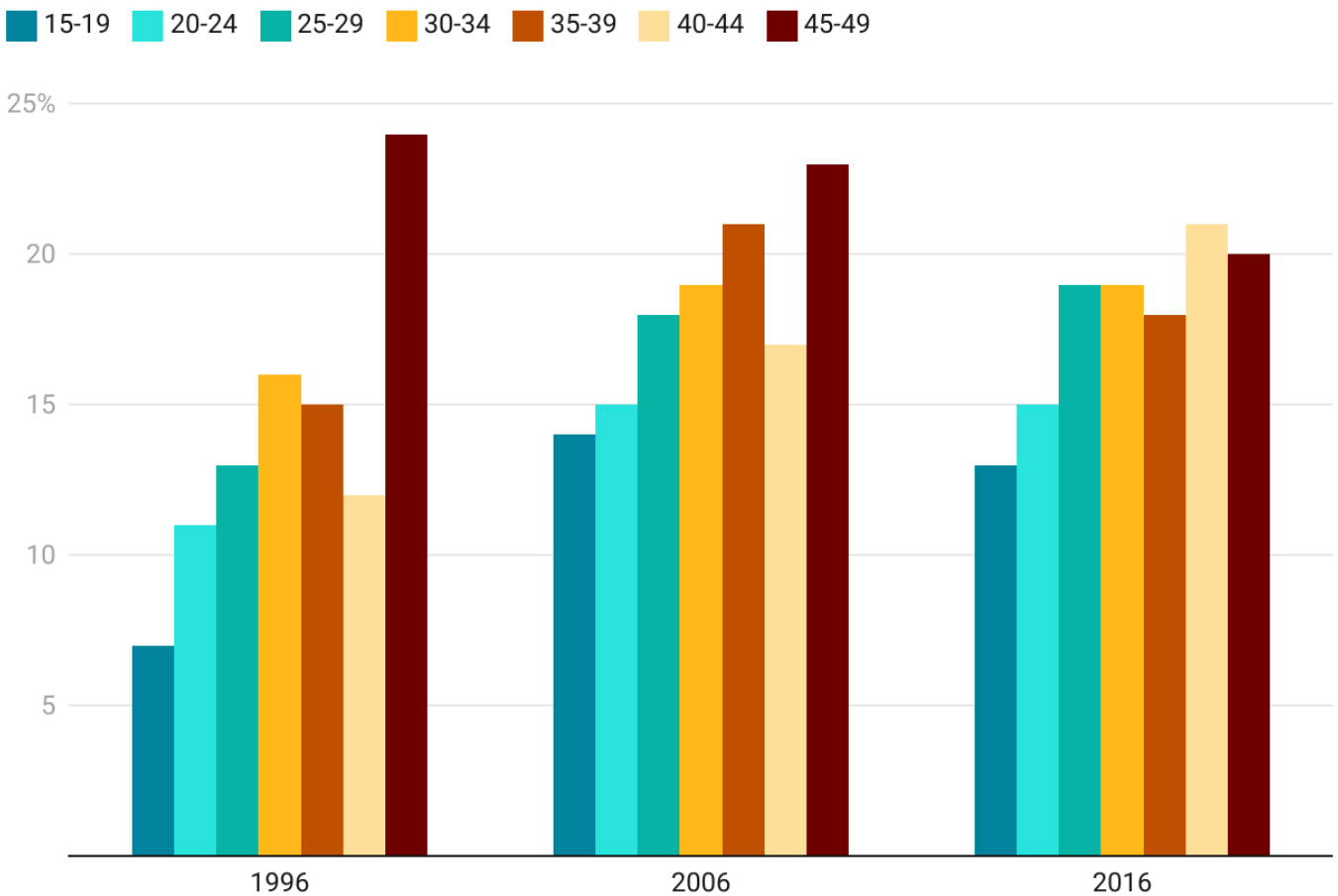
Figure 2: Percentage of PNG women in polygamous marriages by region



Source: The DHS Program • Created with Datawrapper

Fourth, polygamy used to be most common among older women. In 1996, almost one-quarter of women aged 45-49 were in a polygamous relationship. That share has actually gone down, but the share of all other age groups has increased, and the gap between older and younger women has fallen. There is also a significant increase in the proportion of teenage women in a polygamous marriage, which was 7% in 1996 and is now 13%.

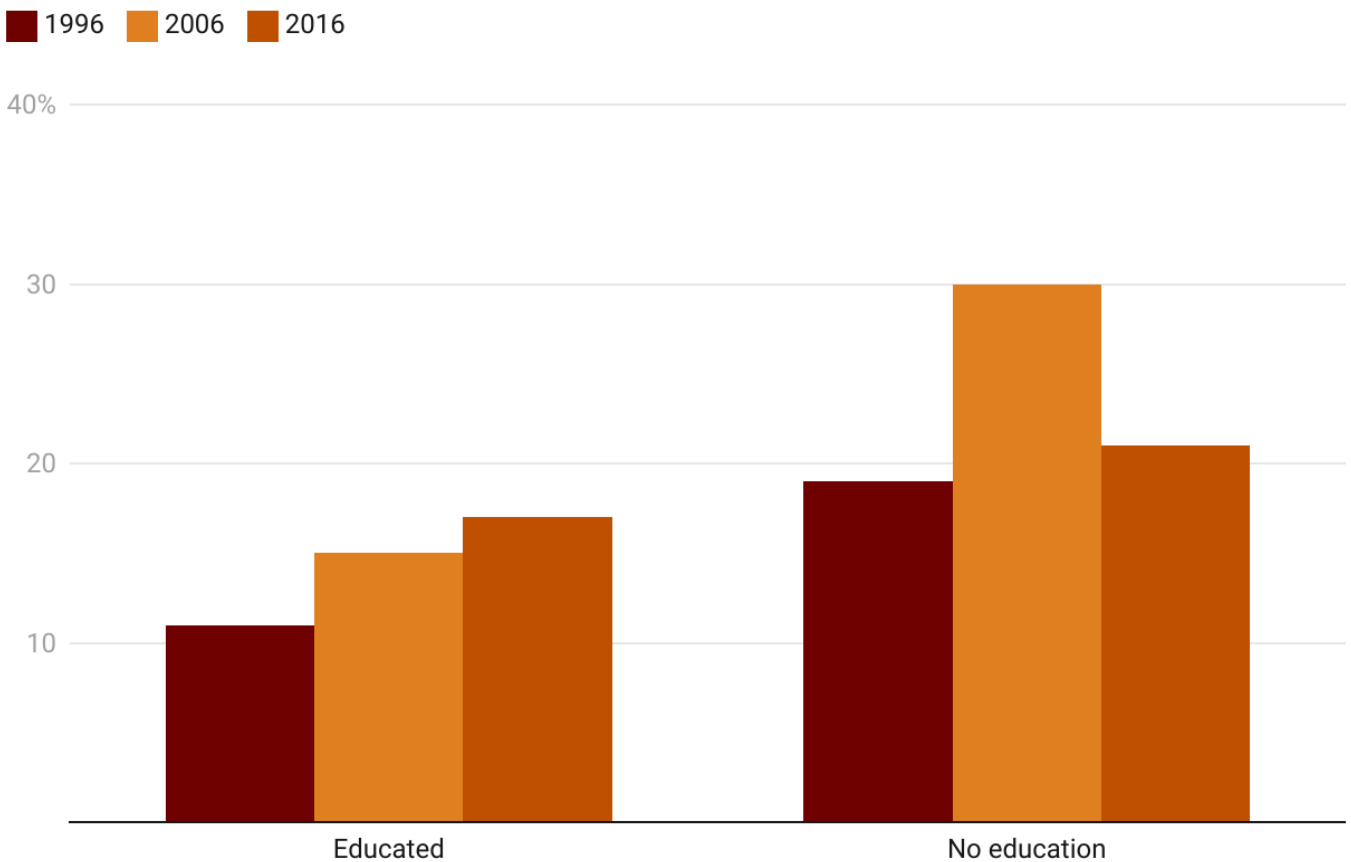
Figure 3: Percentage of PNG women in polygamous marriages by age category



Source: The DHS Program • Created with Datawrapper

Fifth, uneducated women used to be almost twice as likely to be in a polygamous marriage as educated women. But according to the most recent data, an uneducated woman is now only 25% more likely than an educated woman to be in a polygamous relationship. Note that the category of educated includes those women with only an elementary and primary education, and that there is a higher proportion of women who are educated in the general population now.

Figure 4: Percentage of PNG women in polygamous marriages by education



Includes women with primary and elementary education only.

Source: The DHS Program • Created with Datawrapper

To summarise, polygamy increased between 1996 and 2006 and then stabilised over the next decade. But over both decades, polygamy has become more widespread or evenly distributed. Polygamy used to be concentrated in the Highlands, in rural areas, among older and uneducated women. But it is now more evenly spread through all regions of the country, is as common in urban as in rural areas and is less concentrated among older and uneducated women.

Polygamy is by now a huge part of life in PNG. According to the 2016 data, 19% of PNG’s married women – almost one in five – live in polygamous marriages. Not all women are married, so it is about 12% of all women. This is many more than the 3.3% of all men who report themselves to be in a polygamous relationship. Of course, the share of men must be smaller because it is nearly always polygyny (one husband and two or more wives), not polyandry (one wife and two or more husbands). But another factor is that the average man under-reports the extent of polygamy. According to the men surveyed in 2016-18, on average there are 1.08 wives for every husband, but according to the women, there are 1.25. In any case, polygamy affects far more men than the ones who engage in it. Because some men

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take more than one wife, more men than women will never get married. In the 2016-18 survey, 35% of women have no husband, but 46% of men have no wife.

Polygamy is also very common in Africa, but there it is declining. [A 2022 study of 27 sub-Saharan countries](#) also using DHS data and looking at about the same period found that in the first survey (1996) on average 29% of married women were in a polygamous relationship and in the second survey (2016) on average 21% were. There is no sub-Saharan African country where, as in PNG, polygamy has increased over the last 20 years. PNG's polygamy rate has gone from half the sub-Saharan Africa average to very close to that average (18.8% vs 21.2%).

There are many [theories of polygamy](#) and its increased popularity in PNG. But, whatever the reasons for it, the data suggests that it is becoming more entrenched in PNG's national life – increasing in importance and increasingly cutting across regional, urban/rural divides, social classes and age groupings.

Data Note: The 2016–18 DHS level data is made available by [The DHS Program](#). The comparative statistics reported in this blog are available in the: [1996 DHS Report](#) (Table 5.2); [2006 DHS Report](#) (Table 5.2); and [2016–18 DHS Report](#) (Table 4.2.1). For simplicity, we refer to the 2016–18 DHS (carried out over three years) as the 2016 DHS. [Following this precedent](#), we use the better-known word 'polygamy' (more than one wife or husband) instead of less common, but more accurate 'polygyny' (more than one wife). While we refer to wives and husbands, the surveys also include non-married partners, so it would be more accurate to refer to partnered women and men. Finally, the surveys are of women and men aged 15-49.

Disclosures:

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