The Meaning of Being a Siri Wife In a Polygamous Marriage

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Second wives in siri polygamous marriages frequently face a legal inequality, social stigma, and cultural pressure. Interestingly, many siri wives do not necessarily perceive their position negatively. On the contrary, they are able to construct positive meanings through their experiences and social interactions. This study aims to identify the meanings constructed by siri wives regarding their position in polygamous marriages, and analyze the adaptive strategies developed by siri wives. This research employs a qualitative approach with data collected through in-depth interviews. The informants consist of five second siri wives. Data analysis was conducted using the Symbolic Interactionism theory by George Herbert Mead. The findings show that siri marriages are perceived as a form of social status recognition, a source of emotional and financial security, and a symbol of the husbands commitment. The status of a siri wife is also seen as a means of gaining affection, escaping loneliness, and attaining flexibility in roles and time. Children born from siri marriages are regarded as a core part of family identity and a primary reason to remain in the marriage. Adaptive strategies include financial independence, emotional detachment from stigma, social participation, and maintaining proper appearance. It is concluded that siri wives construct the meaning of their status not merely based on legal recognition or societal judgment, but through social interaction, self-awareness, and creative negotiation of their position within the reality of polygamous marriage.

INTRODUCTION

Marriage, as a social institution, not only unites two individuals but also brings wide ranging legal and social consequences. According to Article 5, Paragraph 1 of the Compilation of Islamic Law and Article 2, Paragraph 2 of Law Number 1 of 1974 on Marriage, every marriage must be officially registered to be legally and religiously valid. This registration ensures legal recognition and protection for both the couple and their children (Kementrian Agama RI 2018). However, in practice, many marriages in Indonesia remain unregistered, particularly in the form of siri (unregistered) marriages, which are still prevalent in society. Unregistered marriages also appear in other forms such as child marriage, which often occurs due to socio-economic pressures and low legal awareness (Sunaryanto 2019). Siri marriages are usually linked to polygamous practices. Many legally married men choose to engage in polygamy through serial marriages to bypass legal requirements, especially the obligation to obtain consent from the first wife, as stipulated in Article 5 Paragraph 1 of Law Number 1 of 1974. As a result, siri marriages become a shortcut for polygamous unions without undergoing stricter legal procedures (Maesaroh 2021).

Women who become Siri wives often occupy a vulnerable position both socially and legally. Lacking formal legitimacy, they are excluded from legal protections such as joint property rights in divorce or the ability to claim alimony (Nadriana and Yunani 2023), legally. Moreover, children born from siri marriages often face legal and social challenges due to the absence of official recognition of their paternal lineage . These children may be issued birth certificates that do not list the father's name, which in turn affects their access to education, healthcare, and civil rights (Firdaus, Si, and Thoriquddin 2021).

Beyond administrative issues, Siri wives frequently experience psychological distress due to the legal uncertainty surrounding their marital status. Social stigma further exacerbates their burden, as they are often labeled as mistresses, women who conceived out of wedlock, or homewreckers (Herlina et al. 2024). Tensions with the first wife and the husband's extended family intensify their marginalisation within The household (Nuraeni and Astuti 2023). Despite these challenges, siri wives often

seek to define and negotiate the meaning of their position in polygamous marriages through daily social interactions.

Since polygamous marriages are not officially registered, their actual number is difficult to determine. Therefore, the isbat nikah application data is used as an indirect indicator to estimate the prevalence of such marriages. Isbat nikah refers to the legal process of validating previously unregistered marriages to obtain formal recognition from the state (Rozendana, Saiban, and Yasin 2024). In Dharmasraya Regency, records from the Pulau Punjung Religious Court indicate a significant increase in the number of isbat nikah applications over the past four years, as shown in the following table:

Table 1: Isbat Nikah Applications, Dharmasraya Regency

No	Years	Total Isbat Nikah (Marriage Legalization) Applications
1.	2021	52
2.	2022	74
3.	2023	174
4.	2024	264

Source: Pulau Punjung Religious Court Website, 2025

In Nagari Sitiung, Dharmasraya Regency, the phenomenon of siri marriages reveals a complex and dynamic social landscape. Several unique cases have emerged, including Siri wives living in the same house as the first wife, elopements due to community rejection, and marriages involving significant age gaps such as a husband being older than the wife's father. These diverse cases underscore the distinctive nature of Siri marriages in Nagari Sitiung compared to other areas.

Previous studies have shown that women who become second wives in unregistered (siri) polygamous marriages are not entirely passive, but actively construct personal meanings shaped by their lived experiences. For some, siri marriage is perceived as a form of social protection and a survival strategy under challenging situations, such as financial hardship, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, or the Need for social legitimacy (Ayuni, Hambali, and Suprihatin 2023; Majianto, Faisal, and Yamin 2025). Within this context, women do not merely follow the conditions

imposed upon them but actively reinterpret their roles as wives within family structures that are not legally recognised by the state.

One study further illustrates that second wives in such marriages often view their decision as a pragmatic response to life circumstances. Rather than being solely influenced by male dominance or religious norms, these women enter siri marriages in pursuit of emotional security, economic protection, and social acceptance, despite the absence of legal recognition (Sam'ani et al. 2023).

However, this pragmatic choice does not shield them from social consequences. Other studies reveal that siri wives, particularly those in polygamous arrangements, often face negative social perceptions. They are frequently labelled as mistresses, women pregnant out of wedlock, or homewreckers, which ultimately affects various aspects of their lives (Herlina et al. 2024). Many Siri wives experience psychological stress due to social rejection and legal uncertainty that threaten their position within the marriage. On the other hand, not all Siri wives in polygamous marriages experience dissatisfaction. Their research on the marital satisfaction of Siri wives among the oreng kenek community in Madura found that some wives have been able to develop acceptance of polygamy as part of God's will. Resignation and patience are among the strategies they adopt in facing the reality of siri marriages (Sholihin and Koentjoro 2023).

Despite these contributions, there is still limited research that examines explicitly how Siri wives interpret and give meaning to their status in polygamous marriages. This study aims to fill that gap by focusing on how Siri wives construct meaning through symbolic interaction with their husbands, the first wife, extended family, and broader society. Using George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism, this study explores the meanings these women assign to their marital roles and the strategies they employ to adapt to the legal, social, and personal challenges they face in polygamous siri marriages.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach to understand how women construct the meaning of being second wives in unregistered (siri) polygamous marriages. A qualitative approach was chosen to explore the subjective experiences, interactions, and symbolic interpretations that shape the participants' understanding of their roles. A qualitative approach is suitable when the goal is to understand social phenomena from the perspectives of the actors involved (Afrizal 2019). The research was conducted in Nagari Sitiung, Sitiung Subdistrict, Dharmasraya Regency, West Sumatra. This location was selected because of its distinctive cases of siri polygamy, including women who live in the same household as the first wife, cases of elopement, and marriages involving significant age gaps all of which influence the construction of meaning and lived experiences of these women.

The data in this research consists of primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with five women who are second wives in unregistered (siri) polygamous marriages. To enhance contextual understanding and data validity, additional insights were gathered from three supplementary informants: a local health cadre, a neighbour, and one first wife from a polygamous household. These individuals were selected to provide external and relational perspectives on the social environment surrounding the second wives. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, with specific criteria: women who have been married as second wives for at least five years, whose marriages are unregistered (siri), and who remain actively engaged in the marital relationship.

The local health cadre played a crucial role in identifying suitable informants, as they are responsible for regularly collecting family data at the community level. Given that second wives in unregistered marriages often belong to marginalised and socially hidden groups, the involvement of health cadres was crucial to reaching potential participants who would otherwise be challenging to locate.

The neighbour was selected as a community informant to provide an external perspective and to confirm and cross-check key findings from the primary interviews. Their input helped assess how those around them perceive the second

Siri wives. Them, including whether social stigma is present, how the women are positioned in the eyes of the community, and whether there are noticeable differences in treatment between first and second wives, especially in cases where they live in the same household.

The first wife, on the other hand, was included to offer a relational perspective from within the polygamous family structure. Her account helped examine the interpersonal dynamics between first and second wives, the negotiation of roles and power, and the emotional tensions that may arise. By including her voice, the study was able to triangulate the experiences of the second wives with those of other actors directly involved in the marriage, thereby deepening the symbolic and interactional analysis of second wife status. This triangulation of data sources enhanced the trustworthiness and credibility of the study.

Secondary data were collected from supporting documents including marriage law references, media reports, and academic literature related to siri marriage and polygamy.

Data were analysed using the Miles and Huberman model, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Coding was performed by identifying key themes from each interview question, and the results were organised into tables for clarity. Thematic conclusions were drawn and synthesised into broader categories, forming the analytical foundation for the findings. This approach allowed the researcher to understand how second-siri wives navigate and give meaning to their lived experiences within the framework of unregistered polygamous marriage.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. The Meaning of Being a Siri Wife in Polygamous Marriages

Meaning is the result of a social process formed through interactions between individuals and their social environment. According to George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism theory, human actions do not occur randomly but are guided by meanings created through mutual adjustments based on experience.

Perception, and ongoing interactions in daily life (Mead 2024). Therefore, meaning is dynamic and evolves in response to changes in social, cultural, and environmental contexts.

Based on interview results, it was found that informants assign various meanings to their position as siri wives in polygamous marriages. These meanings are strongly influenced by personal experiences, relationships with their husband and the first wife, as well as their interactions with extended family and the surrounding community. These meanings can be categorised into several parts: the meaning of polygamous marriage for Siri wives, the meaning of their status as Siri wives, and the meaning of children for Siri wives within the context of polygamous marriage.

a. The Meaning of Polygamous Marriage for Siri Wives Polygamous Siri Marriage as an Effort to Obtain Social Status Recognition as a Wife

Unlike previous studies, such as Herlina, which describe Siri wives as frequently stigmatised being labelled as mistresses, women pregnant out of wedlock, or homewreckers, this study finds a contrasting reality (Herlina et al. 2024). Several informants in this research did not experience such stigma; in fact, they felt recognised and valued in their social environment. Their husbands introduced them openly to close circles, involved them in family routines, and treated them with care-symbolic acts that made the women feel like legitimate wives, despite lacking legal recognition.

Informant K shared her experience:

> "…..I don't think anyone has spoken badly about me so far….Even though It's not legal, not officially recognised by the state, and I still feel like I'm Treated like a wife. I mean, it's the same as how he treats his legal wife, he calls me by sweet names, gives me money for groceries, and takes me out once or twice a month." (Interview with Informant K, August 20, 2024).

> "…..Rasanya kakak belum ada dengan orang-orang ngomong jelek tentang kakak….Ya walaupun kakak memang gak resmi gak sah lah nikah secara

negara ya kakak tetap aja rasanya diperlakukan kayak istri kok, maksudnya sama lah kayak gimana sama istri pertama yang sah kan gitu juga kakak, kayak dipanggil sayang, dikasih uang belanja, diajak jalan sekali dua minggu" (*Interview with Informant K, August 20, 2024).*

This quote illustrates how affectionate language, financial support, and quality time function as symbolic elements that affirm the role of a wife. From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, such interactions are meaningful in shaping the self (Mead 2024). They allow Siri wives to reclaim a social role and self-identity as legitimate partners. In this way, stigma is not a given outcome in polygamous siri marriages; it is shaped, resisted, or even reversed through everyday symbolic negotiations within the relationship and the social environment.

Polygamous Siri Marriage as a Form of Commitment and Proof of Husband's Seriousness

Generally, society views true love as realised through legally and religiously sanctioned marriage, considered the highest commitment in a male-female relationship (Dwita and Priadi 2023). However, many men today choose not to marry officially, tending to engage in relationships without legal ties or even regard them as casual with no future commitment. This causes many women to struggle in understanding the extent of a man's commitment in such relationships.

On the other hand, for Siri's wives, Siri's marriage becomes a symbol of genuine commitment from the husband. For them, the proposal to marry seriously is a serious acknowledgement from the husband that the relationship is not just a game, but a committed choice for a shared future. This proposal demonstrates the husband's seriousness in the relationship, even without official state recognition.

In situations where the presence of a male figure is greatly needed to provide security and emotional support, a siri marriage proposal becomes a symbol of real love and commitment. This contrasts sharply with previous experiences with men who only sought fun or were materialistic. Therefore, although siri marriage is not

legally recognised, siri wives still interpret it as a form of sincere love and A relationship worth fighting for. For them, love is not measured by legal status but by the inner experience of feeling loved, valued, and desired as a life partner.

Polygamous Siri Marriage as a Source of Emotional and Economic Security

In dominant societal discourse, siri marriage, particularly in its polygamous form is often viewed as disadvantageous to women. The absence of legal recognition renders the relationship formally invalid, leaving women without access to basic legal protections or social legitimacy (Fitriana et al. 2024). They are often perceived as vulnerable to neglect, exploitation, or invisibility within the family system due to the lack of formal documentation such as a marriage certificate (A, W, and Baehaqi 2024).

However, the findings of this study suggest that Siri wives construct different meanings from their lived experiences. Rather than perceiving illegality as the primary issue, they place greater emphasis on emotional support, care, and practical stability provided by their husbands. For these women, the husband's presence symbolizes not only companionship but also emotional and economic security. Informant H shared:

> "*.....For me, it's okay to be in a siri marriage for now, even though we don't have an official marriage certificate. What matters is that it's already halal. I have someone who takes care of me, I'm not alone anymore. He also helps with the kids' needs. That's what gives me peace of mind. Honestly, since my divorce, it's been tough. Being the sole breadwinner is really exhausting.*" (Interview with Informant H, June 6, 2024).

> "*.....Kalau ante sih memang untuk sekarang gak papa kalau nikah siri, walaupun gak ada surat nikahnya. Yang penting kan udah halal, udah ada yang jagain, gak sendirian lagi kan. Terus kebutuhan anak juga dibantu. Itu yang bikin ante tenang. Soalnya jujur, semenjak cerai itu berat, jadi tulang punggung sendiri rasanya capek banget.*" (Interview with Informant H, June 6, 2024).

This quote highlights the pragmatic and emotional considerations that influence the decision to enter into a serial polygamous marriage. For Informant H, The husband's involvement in daily life, caring for her, supporting her children, and

sharing responsibilities, functions as a symbol of stability and protection, outweighing the absence of legal status.

In line with symbolic interactionism, these daily interactions serve as meaningful symbols through which Siri wives reinterpret their social roles and reclaim emotional affirmation in otherwise precarious conditions. The findings of this study are consistent with Sam'ani, who found that women often enter siri polygamous relationships not solely due to patriarchal pressure or religious norms, but as a conscious response to their life situations, seeking emotional refuge, economic partnership, and a renewed sense of belonging (Sam'ani et al. 2023)

b. The Meaning of the Status of a Siri Wife in Polygamous Marriage:
Status as the Younger Wife Receiving More Affection

In general societal discourse, the status of a second or younger wife, especially Siri wives, is often associated with a negative stigma. However, findings from this study indicate that some Siri wives reinterpret their position in a more positive light, particularly about the affection and attention they receive from their husbands. Emotional closeness, financial support, and frequent inclusion in social events become tangible symbols that affirm love and recognition.

One informant, SM, shared how her husband's actions made her feel prioritized:

> "..... I feel like my husband loves me more than his first wife. It's because he often takes me along wherever he goes, since we live in the same house. Whenever there are events or neighbourhood parties, he usually invites me. So even though our marriage isn't officially registered, I still feel like I get more attention from him." (*Interview with Informant SM, August 17, 2024*).

> ".....Malah ibuk ngerasa suami lebih sayang sama ibuk daripada istri pertamanya. Soalnya ya kalau ke mana-mana, yang sering dibawa tu ibuk karena kan kami tinggal satu rumah. Kalau ada acara atau pesta tetangga kan, ya suami lebih sering ngajak ibuk. Jadi ya walaupun nikahnya siri gak tercatat resmi, ibuk ngerasa tetap dapat perhatian lebih lah" (*Interview with Informant SM, August 17, 2024*).

This interpretation was also supported by observational data from SM's neighbour, KL, who noted:

> "*.....From what we've observed, it appears that the younger wife is the one Pak YT loves more. Whenever there's an event or he goes somewhere, it's always she who goes along. helping out or joining in. The first wife rarely gets invited. I often see it's SM who goes to the market for groceries. Especially now, since the first wife has had a stroke, maybe that's the reason, or maybe it's something else. We don't know.*" (*Interview with Neighbour of informant, June 7, 2024*).

> "*.....Kalau dari yang kami lihat ya, memang kelihatan kalau istri mudanya yang lebih disayang sama Pak YT. Soalnya kalau ada acara atau pergi-pergi, yang dibawa itu dia terus, kayak rewang atau turun mandi. Istri pertama jarang diajak. Bahkan, ibuk sering lihat ke pasar belanja, ya nampaknya memang SM terus yang belanja. Apalagi sekarang kan istri pertamanya udah stroke, entah mungkin karena itu atau apa, kita ndak tahu juga kan.*" (*Interview with neighbor of informant KL, June 7, 2024*).

Viewed through George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism, the meaning of "being loved more" is constructed through everyday interactions and the interpretation of symbolic gestures such as being invited to events or given financial responsibility. According to Mead, meaning is not inherently attached to objects or roles but is actively formed through social interaction and role-taking (Mead 2024).

In this case, the husband's behaviour his consistent attention, and public acknowledgment becomes more meaningful to the wife than formal legal status. These symbolic actions shape the self-concept of the Siri wife as a legitimate partner in the marriage, not through legality, but through repeated validation and emotional affirmation.

Status as a Siri Wife as an Escape from Loneliness and Singlehood

Many women choose the status of a siri wife not because of coercion but as a way to end loneliness and social pressure caused by the stigma attached to being a widow or unmarried woman. A serious marriage gives them a sense of being valued and socially recognised, as well as emotional companionship. Within the symbolic interactionism perspective, the meaning of the Siri wife's status emerges from the Need for emotional comfort and social recognition, which is shaped through everyday experiences and interactions (Mead 2024). Women construct this meaning

through symbols they encounter, such as the husband's presence and acceptance by the social environment, making the status of a wife not just a social label but a space for meaning-making and self-affirmation.

The findings of this study support the argument made by Majianto, who argues that a Siri marriage can serve as a form of social protection and a survival strategy for women facing difficult circumstances, including financial instability, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, and the societal need for legitimacy (Majianto et al, 2025). In both cases, the decision to become a single wife is not merely about fulfilling romantic or religious obligations, but also a conscious effort to reclaim dignity, cope with structural pressures, and achieve a sense of security and belonging in a society that often marginalises single or divorced women.

Status as a Siri Wife is Interpreted as Freedom and Flexibility

Unlike the first wife, who typically carries the full burden of household responsibilities, second wives interpret their position as a form of freedom and flexibility. They have greater control over their time, are free from daily domestic pressures, and tend to experience fewer conflicts due to the relatively infrequent meetings with their husbands. The husband's rare presence creates a more peaceful and calm household atmosphere. Although meetings with the husband are infrequent, as long as financial needs are met, life continues comfortably.

This sentiment was clearly articulated by Informant EW, who expressed a sense of peace when her husband was not present at home:

> "..... I feel more at peace when my husband is not at home, because when he is, we often argue. He used to be physically abusive, too. But when he's not around, I feel safe, no need to wash his clothes, no strange cooking to meet his preferences. At my age, I want peace. But people still know I have a husband, even though he rarely comes home. Usually, in three months, he'll come back at some point, maybe stay for a week, or sometimes drop by briefly and then disappear again." (*Interview with Informant EW, June 6, 2024*).

> "..... Kalau ibuk sebenarnya lebih senang kalau suami gak di rumah, karena kalau di rumah ya sering bertengkar terus. Apalagi dulu sering KDRT. Tapi kalau lagi gak di rumah kan kita aman, gak ada nyuci baju dia, gak ada

masak-masak yang aneh-aneh yang sesuai mau suami aja. Ya kalau di umur segini maunya ya tenang lah. Tapi orang tetap tau ibuk punya suami, walaupun suami jarang pulang. Biasanya dalam tiga bulan itu ada aja pulangnya, mungkin seminggu gak nentu, bahkan kadang cuma mampir sebentar terus ngilang entah ke mana." (*Interview with Informant EW, June 6, 2024).*

Through the lens of symbolic interactionism, this freedom is not a fixed attribute of Siri marriage but a meaning constructed from ongoing interactions and lived experiences. For these wives, the husband's presence, even if symbolic through financial support and the resulting tranquility at home, serve as key symbol in shaping their understanding of what it means to be a wife. This illustrates how legal or normative expectations do not bind their identity, but are actively formed through dynamic interpretations of everyday life (Mead 2024).

c. The Meaning of Children for Wives in Polygamous Siri Marriages

In unregistered (siri) polygamous marriages, children are not only perceived as biological outcomes but also hold deep symbolic significance for the wives. They represent continuity, emotional legitimacy, and become sources of psychological strength. For Siri wives who live under legal ambiguity and social stigma, children serve as emotionally anchoring figures validating their identity and reinforcing their commitment to the marital relationship. The following table outlines the demographic profile of the Siri wives interviewed in this study, including the number of children they have:

Table 2 : Profile of Siri Wives

No	Initials	Age	Jorong	Duration of Marriage	Number of Children
1.	SM	55	Piruko Tengah	32 Years	0
2.	K	32	Pasang Sidondang	12 Years	2
3.	EW	55	Padang Sidondang	17 Years	2
4.	H	40	Pisang Rebus	5 Years	0
5.	SY	47	Koto Sitiung	23 Years	3

Source: Primary Data, 2024

As shown in the table, several Siri wives have children, while others do not. For those who do, the children often serve as emotional reinforcement and help solidify their roles in the family, even though the marriage itself lacks legal standing. However, the symbolic importance of these children is entangled with legal constraints, especially concerning civil documentation and social rights a complexity that is further discussed in the next section.

Children as Legally Unrecognised Offspring

Due to the unofficial nature of Siri marriages, children born within these unions are often unable to include their father's name on official documents such as birth certificates or family identity cards (Kartu Keluarga) (Ramelan, Kasim, and Kamba 2023). This legal void affects not only the administrative rights of the child such as access to social benefits and public services, but also influences how society views the legitimacy of their identity (Yulianti et al. 2023). These children are frequently subjected to stigma, being labelled as illegitimate or unacknowledged.

Children as Reinforcers of Small Family Identity

For Siri wives, the presence of children transforms the relationship from a private emotional affair into a recognisable family unit. Children provide tangible proof that the relationship is not fleeting or casual, but rooted in emotional investment and shared responsibility. The existence of children gives wives the confidence to identify themselves not just as partners, but as mothers and legitimate participants in a domestic structure.

This meaning is reflected in the statement of Informant K, who shared her feelings of anxiety during her first pregnancy. She felt worried because of The unofficial status of the relationship and the uncertainty surrounding her husband's presence. However, the birth of her child transformed that anxiety into a sense of confidence:

> "*.....When I was pregnant, I was anxious, honestly. Even though my husband would come home sometimes, it wasn't every day. So I felt scared, maybe it was the pregnancy hormones or something, but I was afraid that*

one day he might suddenly disappear. You just never know, right? But thank God, when MT (my first child) was born, that anxiety started to fade. I began to feel like things were more certain, like he had a family here, and I wasn't just his secret woman anymore. Maybe the pregnancy played a role in that too." (*Interview with Informant K, August 20, 2024*).

"*.....Waktu kakak hamil, gimana ya cemas kakak, asli walaupun memang suami kan kadang ke rumah kan tapi kan gak setiap hari kan jadinya takut ntah karena hormon hamil atau gimana takut nanti kiranya tiba tiba hilang gitu ha kan kita gak tau kan ya. Tapi alhamdulillah lahir anak si MT (anak) anak yang pertama ni perasaan cemas tu udah mulai reda, karena Kaka ngerasa ini udah jelas berarti suami udah punya keluarga disini kayak bukan simpanan lah kakak ni gitu ha, mungkin karena faktor hamil juga mah.*" (*Interview with Informant K, August 20, 2024*).

From this statement, it's clear that pregnancy and childbirth became crucial moments that reshaped how Informant K understood herself and her relationship. The child not only reinforced her identity in her own eyes, but also the eyes of the surrounding community as part of a real, small family. This shows that the presence of a child became a turning point in how she made sense of the relationship. The fear of being abandoned or merely seen as her husband's "hidden partner" gradually faded, replaced by a growing sense of confidence that she was truly part of a legitimate family unit.

Children become existential symbols offering reassurance, reinforcing identity, and creating continuity in a social reality where legal status is lacking. Informants reported that raising a child together with their husband, even unofficially, made them feel more secure in their marital role. Through daily interaction with the child, these women construct a symbolic world where they are wives and mothers, regardless of external recognition. According to Mead, symbols like caregiving, maternal authority, and the emotional bond with a child become central in shaping how individuals define themselves (Mead 2024). The symbolic presence of the child helps the wife assert her identity, not through formal marriage certificates, but through her active role in a "significant relationship" that involves care, love, and responsibility.

Children as the Main Reason to Stay in the Marriage

In marriages marked by instability, social marginalisation, or even abuse, children often emerge as the primary reason for women to stay. For many Siri wives, leaving the marriage is not seen as an option, because they feel morally and emotionally bound to provide their children with access to a father figure. Even when personal well-being is compromised, the child's future and psychological stability are prioritised.

Some informants stated that their husbands were inconsistent in providing financial or emotional support, yet they chose to remain in the relationship for the sake of the child. The child becomes a moral anchor and a symbol of purpose. Through symbolic interaction, the mother internalises her role as protector, nurturer, and moral guide, which gives meaning to her suffering and strengthens her endurance.

As expressed by Informant SY in her interview:

".....Sometimes my husband provides for us, sometimes he doesn't. If we didn't have children, I probably would've asked for a divorce a long time ago. But because we have kids, I started thinking again about what if they ask about their father one day? Honestly, I don't want my children to grow up without a father figure. I'd rather be the one who sacrifices. So even though my husband isn't always around, I choose to stay for the sake of the kids." (*Interview with Informant SY, August 22, 2024*).

".....Suami kadang kasih nafkah, kadang nggak. Kalau nggak ada anak, mungkin udah lama ibuk minta cerai. Tapi, karena ada anak, ibuk mikir lagi, nanti gimana kalau anak-anak nanya ayahnya. Ibuk jujur nggak mau kalau anak-anak kehilangan sosok ayahnya. Biarlah ibuk yang berkorban. Jadi, meskipun suami nggak selalu ada, ibuk tetap bertahan, demi anak-anak." (*Interview with Informant SY, August 22, 2024*).

This statement illustrates that children are not just a reason for Informant SY to stay in her marriage despite its less-than-ideal conditions. The presence of her children gives her a more profound sense of purpose in life, transforming her suffering into strength and motivating her to keep fighting for her children's future.

In Mead's theoretical framework, identity and meaning are constructed through the "looking-glass self", how individuals see themselves through the lens of others, particularly those they care about (Mead 2024). Children reflect to their mothers a sense of purpose, responsibility, and emotional connection. This reinforces the wife's commitment to staying in the relationship, even when doing so involves personal sacrifice. The symbolic meaning of children, therefore, extends beyond biological ties: they are emotional pillars that legitimise the mother's identity, reaffirming her choices, and transform an otherwise vulnerable position into a meaningful and purposeful existence.

2. Adaptation Strategies of Siri Wives in Polygamous Marriages

Becoming a siri wife in a polygamous marriage places women in a complex and challenging position legally unrecognised, socially stigmatised, and personally vulnerable. However, Siri wives do not simply accept this marginal status. Instead, they actively construct various adaptation strategies as a means to sustain a meaningful life and assert their dignity. From the perspective of George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism, these strategies are not just practical actions, but processes of meaning making, through which wives create and affirm their identities using social symbols such as employment, emotional detachment, social participation, and personal appearance to redefine themselves not as victims, but as empowered individuals within a stigmatized framework (Mead 2024).

From the perspective of George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism theory, these adaptation strategies emerge from the individual's awareness of how others perceive them (the "Me"), which then informs their reactions and actions as expressions of the "I," the spontaneous and subjective self (Mead, 2024). Therefore, The strategies employed by Siri wives are not passive responses to circumstances but are conscious actions taken to assert agency over their lives.

These efforts represent a form of psychological and social equilibrium maintenance. Acts such as distancing themselves from unsupportive social environments, lowering expectations of their husbands, or establishing new

relationships are part of their efforts to preserve a sense of meaning in their role and identities. Such strategies are dynamic and contextual, reflecting the core principle of symbolic interactionism: that meaning is not inherent in an action itself but is continuously shaped through interaction and interpretation. For siri wives, every adaptive action becomes a way of reaffirming their identity, not merely reacting to social definitions, but actively constructing personal meaning within a constrained social framework. The forms of these adaptive strategies are as follows:

a. Financial Independence: A Symbol of Autonomy and Self-Worth

In the face of uncertain financial support and the absence of legal recognition, many siri wives choose to work or manage small businesses. Their work is not merely a means of survival; it is a symbolic act of resistance and a means of constructing identity. Through their economic independence, they affirm themselves as self-reliant and capable individuals. Their livelihoods are not only sources of income but also expressions of existential autonomy. By supporting themselves and their children, they construct meaningful identities that transcend their marginalised legal status.

According to Mead, the "self" emerges through social interaction and reflection on one's behaviour (Mead, 2024). In this case, employment serves as a symbol that shapes the "Me", the socially expected role of a responsible woman while simultaneously asserting the "I", the spontaneous self who chooses to maintain dignity and agency amid adversity.

b. Emotional Detachment from Stigma: Rejecting Negative Social Labels

One of the most commonly employed strategies is emotional detachment or indifference toward negative public perceptions. Siri wives consciously reject derogatory labels such as "homewrecker" or "husband snatcher" by choosing not to internalise these meanings. This conscious distancing from negative social definitions allows them to maintain a sense of control over their self-image and social interactions.

From the lens of symbolic interactionism, this is an act of resisting the "generalised other", the internalised perception of how society views them (Mead 2024). Rather than adopting these negative labels, Siri wives exercise agency by reinterpreting their experiences and asserting a different version of self.

c. Social Participation: Building a Positive Social Identity

Active involvement in community activities such as religious gatherings (yasinan), neighbourhood savings groups (arisan), communal work (gotong royong), and social events, serves as a powerful tool for shaping a positive public identity. These actions symbolise inclusion, belonging, and a willingness to contribute to the social fabric. Despite their unique marital status, they maintain social ties and demonstrate a commitment to the well-being of their community. This repositions their identity beyond the private domain of polygamous marriage.

In Mead's theory, participating in communal life allows individuals to engage with shared social symbols and perform roles that are recognised and respected by others (Mead 2024). By doing so, Siri wives are not just "second wives"; they are neighbours, friends, and community members.

d. Modest Dress and Friendly Demeanour: Symbolic Compliance with Social Norms

Adopting a modest appearance and maintaining a friendly attitude serve as subtle yet powerful strategies for social acceptance. Dressing modestly reduces the likelihood of social suspicion or jealousy, while being polite and warm creates an Impression of respectability and humility. Their physical presentation becomes a strategy for social survival, helping them gain respect even in the absence of formal marital recognition

According to Mead's symbolic interactionist framework, clothing and behaviour serve as social symbols through which individuals perform their roles and signal their alignment with societal expectations (Mead 2024). By presenting themselves as well-mannered and unobtrusive, Siri wives align their "Me" with the

image of a morally acceptable woman one who is not a threat to social order. From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, the adaptation strategies of siri wives in polygamous marriages are not passive responses to marginalisation, but deliberate and dynamic efforts to construct positive meanings in the face of adversity. By employing symbols such as economic activity, emotional detachment, community involvement, and social appearance, these women reconstruct their identities not as marginalised figures, but as resilient individuals navigating a complex social terrain.

Rather than accepting societal definitions, they reinterpret their experiences and assert control over the meanings attached to their status. In doing so, they shift the narrative from one of invisibility or deviance, to one of being resourceful, dignified, and socially engaged actors in their own lives.

CONCLUSION

Through the lens of symbolic interactionism, this study concludes that siri wives construct the meaning of their status not solely through legality or societal judgments, but through reflective social interactions, self-awareness (Self), and anticipation of social expectations (Mind), all shaped by their continuous engagement with the surrounding society (Society). These internal processes allow them to create personal meanings that affirm their emotional significance within unregistered polygamous marriages, such as feeling loved, valued, and emotionally secure, despite lacking formal recognition.

Practically, this study urges community leaders, religious institutions, and local governments to be more sensitive in acknowledging the presence and needs of siri wives. Local support systems such as women's forums, counselling centres, or Religious study groups can serve as safe spaces where these women access guidance without fear of stigma.

Moreover, policymakers are advised to consider culturally respectful protections such as access to children's education and healthcare services for families in unregistered marriages. Thus, the findings of this research offer not only theoretical insight but also a foundation for concrete actions that can enhance social

inclusion, emotional well-being, and daily resilience for siri wives in polygamous unions.

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