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Poll: Across the World Many See Discrimination Against Widows and Divorced Women

This report presents an updated analysis of a poll of 17 nations originally released in advance of International Widows Day (June 23) in 2008, a year that marked the 60th anniversary of the UN General Assembly's adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

A WorldPublicOpinion.org poll of 18 nations around the world finds a widespread perception that widows and divorced women are treated worse than other women. In only two countries do a majority say that there is no discrimination against widows and in only one country does a majority say there is no discrimination against divorced women.

In 12 of the 18 nations polled, about 4 in 10 perceived that there is some or a great deal of discrimination against widows. The same was true for discrimination against divorced women.

On average across all 18 nations, just 29 percent said there is no discrimination against widows at all, while 20 percent said there is a little, 27 percent some, and 16 percent a great deal. Similarly, for divorced women, an average of 27 percent said there is no discrimination, 21 percent said a little, 27 percent some, and 17 percent a great deal.

“Discrimination against widows and divorced women appears to be a phenomenon of many countries, not just some traditional cultures,” says Steven Kull, director of WorldPublicOpinion.org. “People in most countries, including developed ones, recognize there is at least some discrimination.”

Poorer treatment may take a variety of forms. In less developed nations, women's rights and development experts have long noted that wherever the wife has trouble securing her property rights after her husband's death, the widow and her children can become impoverished—in extreme cases by being stripped of her land or goods and expelled from the household. Divorce laws that do not recognize the wife's labor as constituting an economic stake in the household can have the same result. In developed nations, since women live longer, gaps in a country's social safety net are more likely to affect women. In the United States, for example, poverty rates for widows and divorced or separated women are far above the average.¹

¹ Sandra Yin, “How Older Women Can Shield Themselves From Poverty,” Population Reference Bureau, 2008. <http://www.prb.org/Journalists/Webcasts/2008/olderwomen.aspx>

Steven Kull adds, “While there have been no large-scale studies quantifying the scope of discrimination against widows and divorced women, the thousands of respondents in the poll report that the problem is quite widespread.”

WorldPublicOpinion.org is a collaborative research project of research centers from around the world, managed by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland. The primary funder of the study was the Oak Foundation.

Interviews with 16,103 respondents were conducted in 18 nations representing 59 percent of the world’s population. This includes most of the largest nations in the world—China, India, the United States, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Russia—as well as Argentina, Mexico, Britain, France, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Egypt, Iran, Turkey, the Palestinian territories, Thailand and South Korea. Margins of error range from +/-2 to 4 percent. The survey was fielded between Jan. 10 and September 10, 2008.

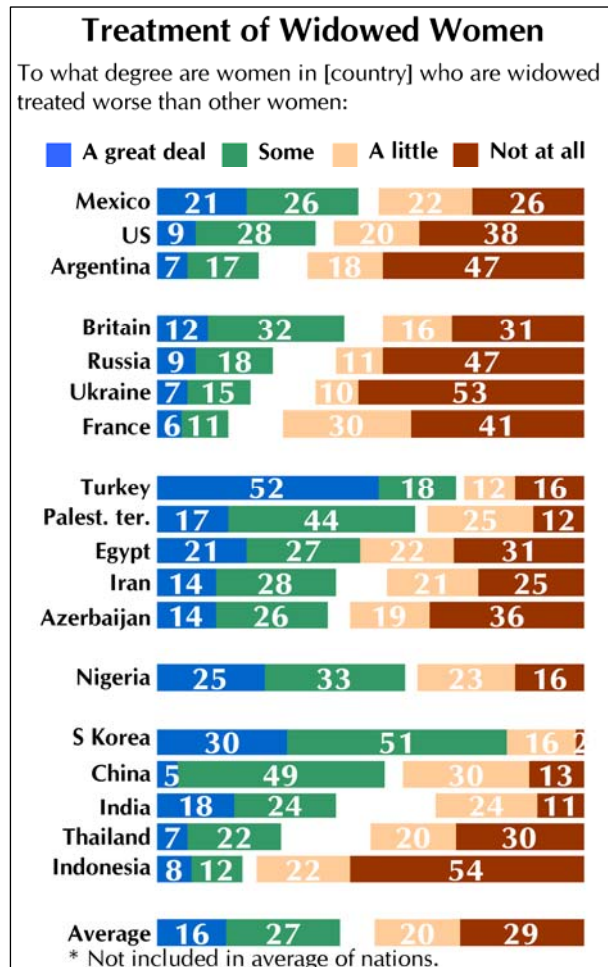
Treatment of Widows

In six nations the dominant view was that there is “some” or a “great deal” of discrimination against widows. This included majorities in South Korea (81%), Turkey (70%), the Palestinian territories (61%), Nigeria (58%) and China (54%). In India, a substantial plurality agreed (42 to 35%), though India is a country that has received substantial international attention over the mistreatment of widows.

In Mexico and Great Britain views were divided, with nearly half of those who answered saying that widows are often treated unfairly in their country.

Only two countries had a majority saying that there is no discrimination against widows—Ukraine (53%) and Indonesia (54%).

Six more countries had a majority saying there is little or no discrimination. French (71%), Argentines (65%), Russians (58%), Americans (58%), Azerbaijanis (55%), and Egyptians (53%) were relatively sanguine about the treatment of widows in their societies. In Thailand half said there is little or no discrimination.



Interestingly, in China more thought widows are mistreated (54%) than thought divorced women are mistreated (46%). This pattern was also present in Nigeria and the Palestinian territories.

Treatment of Divorced Women

Majorities said divorced women are treated worse than others in six nations: South Korea (82%), and in most of the largely Muslim nations polled—Egypt (80%), Turkey (72%), the Palestinian territories (53%), Iran (51%), and Azerbaijan (54%). Pluralities agreed in India (46%).

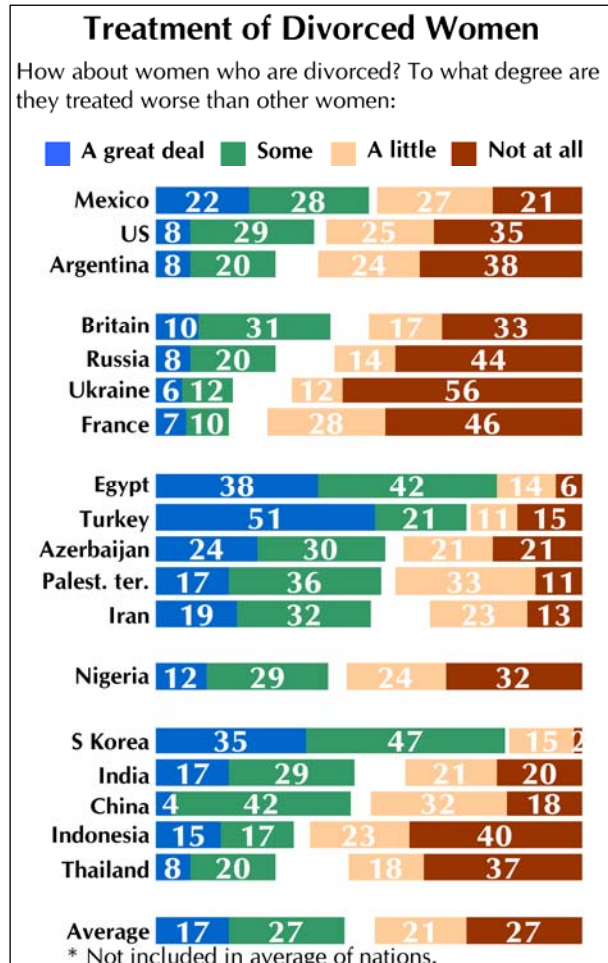
Out of 18 nations, only one—Ukraine—had a majority (56%) saying that divorced women are not discriminated against at all.

Another seven had majorities who thought there is no more than a little discrimination against divorced women in their country. These include the French (74%), Russians (58%), Indonesians (63%), Argentines (62%), Americans (60%), Nigerians (56%), and Thais (55%).

Analysis of Variations Between Countries

Perceptions of the extent of discrimination vary widely between countries. The breadth or intensity of the perception does not necessarily correlate with the actual magnitude of discrimination. In countries where discrimination is customary and unchallenged people may find it so lacking in salience that they do not readily note it. On the other hand, in countries where there have recently been efforts to mitigate such discrimination people may be more aware of it, even though it is improving.

For example, **South Korea** had the largest majorities believing that widows (81%) and divorcees (82%) are mistreated in their country. Recently South Korea enacted legal reforms advancing women’s status, and in 2005 its high court granted women for the first time the right to claim an equal share in jointly owned family property. Jeong Han Wool of the East Asian Institute (Seoul) adds: “Up until this year Korea employed a family



registry system under which the status of “widow or divorcee” could cause some complications.” Such changes may well have raised the salience of the issue in the minds of Koreans.

Similarly, a large majority in **Turkey** (70%) perceived discrimination against widows with the largest number (52%) of any of the nations polled saying that they are mistreated a great deal. The same pattern applies to divorced women—72 percent of the Turkish public thought divorced women are mistreated, with 51 percent saying a great deal. This issue may have gained a greater profile in Turkish society as part of the process of Turkey seeking accession into the European Union. The European Parliament said that while women have officially had full political rights in Turkey since the 1930s, customary treatment of women in the country’s southeast has varied from the legal ideal.²

In **Egypt**, an overwhelming majority (80%) thought that divorced women are mistreated (a great deal, 38%; some, 42%), though a substantially lower number (48%) perceived this level of discrimination of widows. Egyptian law has been criticized by Human Rights Watch for its differing forms of initiating divorce for men and women, for denying the woman property rights in the marital home unless she has a specific legal title, and for the “obedience law” which conditions alimony on obedience to the ex-husband.³

In the **Palestinian territories**, majorities thought that both widows and divorced women are discriminated against (61% and 53%, respectively). Of the two, widows were more widely viewed as being mistreated. The perception that widows are discriminated against was stronger among the young (18-29 years, 60%; 60 years and older, 38%), among low-income people, and interestingly, among men (men 65%, women 56%). Family relations in the territories are still governed by Egyptian legal codes (in Gaza) or Jordanian ones (in the West Bank), because no unified Palestinian law has been finalized. The territories have been criticized for having differing forms of initiating divorce for women and men, and for having inheritance laws that discriminate against women.⁴

In **Nigeria**, a clear majority (58%) thought widows experience at least some mistreatment in their country, while a lesser 41 percent thought that divorced women are mistreated. Those living in rural areas, having lower income, or advanced in years were more likely to think widows are mistreated. Majorities of both Christians (62%) and Muslims (54%)

²“Women’s Rights in Turkey: Improvements Still Needed,” European Parliament Press Service, Feb. 13, 2007, at http://www.europarl.europa.eu/comparl/femm/press/2007/20070213_press_release_en.pdf.

³ Human Rights Watch, “Divorced from Justice: Women’s Unequal Access to Divorce in Egypt,” December 2004, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2004/egypt1204>.

⁴ Human Rights Watch, “A Question of Security: Violence Against Palestinian Women and Girls,” November 2006, http://www.hrw.org/reports/2006/opt1106/7.htm#_Toc148851357. See also Freedom House, “Palestine (Palestinian Authority and Israeli-Occupied Territories),” <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=180>.

held this view. Recently, a new law banning traditional practices harmful to widows was passed in one of Nigeria's eastern states, gaining attention for the issue across Nigeria.⁵

In **China**, a 54-percent majority saw widows as discriminated against, while a lesser 46 percent saw this as being the case for divorced women. This view of widows' situation is stronger among women (60%) than among men (48%), and slightly stronger among the young (18-29 years, 60%). The Chinese government has engaged in significant legal reforms to protect women's rights since the 1990s. Inheritance laws today guarantee the inheritance rights of widows, but a traditional stigma on widows' remarrying has not entirely faded away.⁶

Variations may also be affected by personal experience of widowhood. The Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s greatly increased the number of widows in Iran in the population at that time. Their children are now adults, and the age gap on this issue is extraordinary. Among those aged 60 and over only 18 percent thought widows are mistreated in Iran, while 67 percent do not. But among those aged 18 to 29, 53 percent did think widows are mistreated, and only 37 percent did not.

India seems to follow a different pattern. The national government has enacted numerous laws to protect women's rights, including complete prohibitions against traditional practices for which India is famous, such as the burning of widows (*Sati*) and the giving or receiving of dowries of any size. However, enforcement has been challenging, and there are many regional, religious and caste variants of family law which tend to escape government jurisdiction.

Despite the prominence of the issue, perceptions of discrimination were relatively modest, with a plurality of 42 percent saying that widows are discriminated against (though those with more education were more likely to see widows as mistreated). This may be related to a relatively low level of consensus about the importance of women's rights, or the need for action against discrimination: lower than in any of the other nations polled.

In other polling on women's rights in general, WorldPublicOpinion.org has found that while the majority (60%) of the public in India felt that women's rights are important, this is less than in any of the other 15 nations surveyed (global average 86% important). Furthermore, fewer Indians felt the government should have a role in preventing discrimination against women (53%) than the global average (80%) or that the government should do more to prevent discrimination against women (India 44%, global average 77%).

⁵ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Responses to Information Requests (RIR) NGA43282E (Nigeria), Jan. 12, 2005, <http://www.irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/research/rit/?action=record.viewrec&gotorec=433946>

⁶ Hsiang-Ming Kung, "Tradition—Persistence and Transition," <http://family.jrank.org/pages/254/China-Tradition-Persistence-Transition.html>. See also the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China, "Women and the Law," October 10, 2007, http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=110_house_hearings&docid=f:40784.pdf.

These findings were also published in the December 2008 report [World Public Opinion and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#).