

World Public Opinion on the Treatment of Widows and Divorced Women

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WorldPublicOpinion.org (WPO) is an international collaborative project whose aim is to give voice to public opinion around the world on international issues. As the world becomes increasingly integrated, problems have become increasingly global, pointing to a greater need for understanding between nations and for elucidating global norms. With the growth of democracy in the world, public opinion has come to play a greater role in the foreign policy process. WorldPublicOpinion.org seeks to reveal the values and views of publics in specific nations around the world as well as global patterns of world public opinion.

The WorldPublicOpinion.org network is a consortium of research centers studying public opinion on international issues in their respective countries. At present the network consists of research centers in 22 countries across all of the major continents. The network includes countries that represent the majority of the world population. In some countries there are two centers—one that conducts the polling and another that emphasizes policy analysis. For more complete information about each center including contact information please see the list of Research Partners at the end of this study.

The Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) was established in 1992 with the purpose of giving public opinion a greater voice in international relations. PIPA conducts in-depth studies of public opinion that include polls, focus groups and interviews. It integrates its findings together with those of other organizations. It actively seeks the participation of members of the policy community in developing its polls so as to make them immediately relevant to the needs of policymakers. PIPA is a joint program of the Center on Policy Attitudes (COPA) and the Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland (CISSM).

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

A WorldPublicOpinion.org poll of 17 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 17 nations polled, about 4 in 10 perceive there is some or a great deal of discrimination against widows. The same is true for discrimination against divorced women.

On average across all 17 nations, just 28 percent say there is no discrimination against widows at all, while 20 percent say there is a little, 27 percent some, and 16 percent a great deal. Similarly, for divorced women, an average of 27 percent say there is no discrimination, 21 percent say a little, 28 percent some, and 18 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 countries, 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 countries, 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

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.”

The poll is being released in advance of International Widows Day (June 23). This year is also the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that “Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration,

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

without distinction of any kind, such as...sex,” and goes on to say that “men and women...are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.”

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 17,595 respondents were conducted in 17 nations representing 59 percent of the world’s population. This includes most of the largest countries in the world—China, India, the United States, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Russia—as well as 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 May 6. More details can be found at: www.WorldPublicOpinion.org.

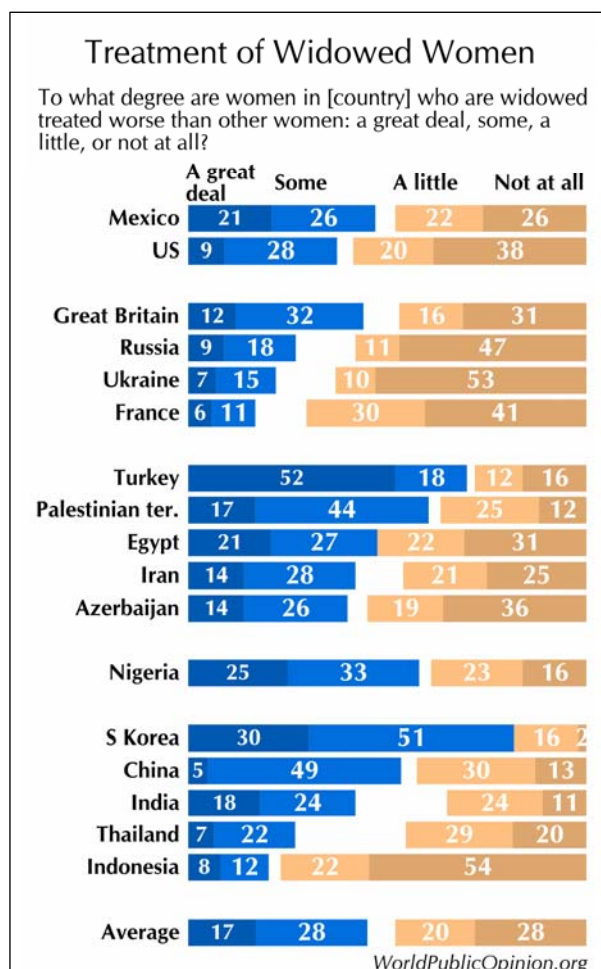
Treatment of Widows

In six nations the dominant view is that there is at least some discrimination against widows. This includes majorities in South Korea (81%), Turkey (70%), the Palestinian Territories (61%), Nigeria (58%) and China (54%). In India, a substantial plurality agrees (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 are divided, with nearly half of those who answered saying that widows are often treated unfairly in their country.

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

Five more countries have a majority saying there is little or no discrimination. French (71%), Russians (58%), Americans (58%), Azerbaijanis (55%), and Egyptians (53%) are



relatively sanguine about the treatment of widows in their societies. In Thailand half say there is little or no discrimination.

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

Treatment of Divorced Women

Majorities say divorced women are treated worse than others in five 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 agree in India (46%).

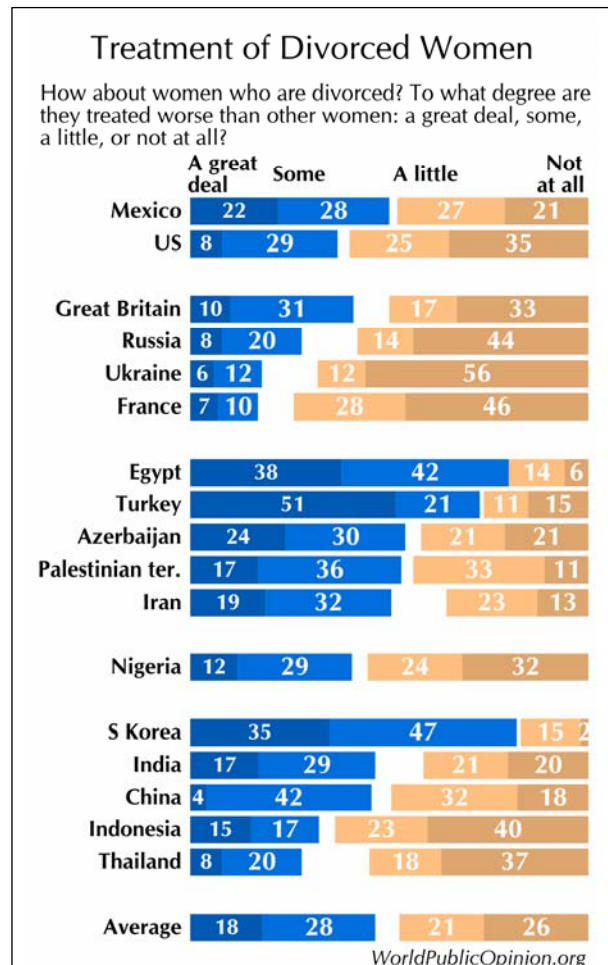
Out of 17 nations, only one—Ukraine—has a majority (56%) saying that divorced women are not discriminated against at all.

Another six have majorities who think there is no more than a little discrimination against divorced women in their country. These include the French (74%), Russians (58%), Indonesians (63%), 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** has the largest majorities believing that widows (81%) and divorcees (82%) are mistreated in their country. Recently South Korea has 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%) perceives 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 think 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 has 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%) thinks that divorced women are mistreated (a great deal, 38%; some, 42%), though interestingly a substantially lower number (48%) perceive 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 think that both widows and divorced women are discriminated against (61% and 53%, respectively). Strikingly, of the two, widows are more widely viewed as being mistreated. The perception that widows are discriminated against is 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%) thinks widows experience at least some mistreatment in their country, while a lesser 41 percent think that divorced women are mistreated. Those living in rural areas, having lower income, or advanced in years are more likely to

²“Women’s Rights in Turkey: Improvements Still Needed,” European Parliament Press Service, Feb. 13, 2007, at http://www.europarl.europa.eu/compar/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>.

think widows are mistreated. Majorities of both Christians (62%) and Muslims (54%) hold 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 sees widows as discriminated against, while a lesser 46 percent see 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 think widows are mistreated in Iran, while 67 percent do not. But among those aged 18 to 29, 53 percent do think widows are mistreated, and only 37 percent do 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 are relatively modest, with a plurality of 42 percent saying that widows are discriminated against (though those with more education are 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 countries polled.

In recent polling on women's rights in general, WorldPublicOpinion.org has found that while the majority (60%) of the public in India feels that women's rights are important, this is less than in any of the other 15 countries surveyed (global average 86% important). Furthermore, fewer Indians feel 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.

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Q20-W4: To what degree are women in [country] who are widowed treated worse than other women: a great deal, some, a little, or not at all?

	A great deal	Some	A little	Not at all	DK / NS
Mexico	21	26	22	26	5
US	9	28	20	38	4
France	6	11	30	41	13
Great Britain	12	32	16	31	9
Russia	9	18	11	47	15
Ukraine	7	15	10	53	15
Azerbaijan	14	26	19	36	5
Egypt	21	27	22	31	0
Iran	14	28	21	25	12
Palestinian ter.	17	44	25	12	3
Turkey	52	18	12	16	2
Nigeria	25	33	23	16	3
China	5	49	30	13	4
India	18	24	24	11	23
Indonesia	8	12	22	54	3
S Korea	30	51	16	2	0
Thailand	7	22	20	30	21
Average	16	27	20	28	8

Q20a-W4a: How about women who are divorced?

	A great deal	Some	A little	Not at all	DK / NS
Mexico	22	28	27	21	2
US	8	29	25	35	3
France	7	10	28	46	9
Great Britain	10	31	17	33	9
Russia	8	20	14	44	14
Ukraine	6	12	12	56	14
Azerbaijan	24	30	21	21	4

Egypt	38	42	14	6	0
Iran	19	32	23	13	14
Palestinian ter.	17	36	33	11	3
Turkey	51	21	11	15	1
Nigeria	12	29	24	32	4
China	4	42	32	18	5
India	17	29	21	20	12
Indonesia	15	17	23	40	4
S Korea	35	47	15	2	1
Thailand	8	20	18	37	17
Average	18	28	21	27	7

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METHODOLOGY

Country	Sample Size (unweighted)	MoE (%)	Field dates	Survey methodology	Type of sample
Azerbaijan	602	4.1	Jan 13 – Feb 5, 2008	Face-to-face	National
China	1000	3.2	Jan 10-25, 2008	Telephone	Urban ¹
Egypt	600	4.1	Jan 17-27, 2008	Face-to-face	Urban ²
France	600	4.1	Feb 5-11, 2008	Telephone	National
Great Britain	800	3.5	Jan 29 – Feb 19, 2008	Telephone	National
India	1023	3.2	February 25-29, 2008	Face-to-face	National ³
Indonesia	811	3.5	Jan 19-29, 2008	Face-to-face	National ⁴
Iran	710	3.8	Jan 13 – Feb 9, 2008	Face-to-face	National
Mexico	850	3.4	Jan 25-27, 2008	Telephone	National ⁵
Nigeria	1000	3.2	February 7-18, 2008	Face-to-face	National ⁶
Palestinian territories	626	4.0	February 10-23, 2008	Face-to-face	National ⁷
Russia	1600	3.5	Jan 18-22, 2008	Face-to-Face	National ⁸
South Korea	600	4.1	Feb 11-12, 2008	Telephone	National
Thailand	2699	1.9	Apr 21 – May 6, 2008	Face-to-face	National ⁹
Turkey	719	3.7	Jan 12-24, 2008	Face-to-face	National
Ukraine	2046	3.1	Feb 8-18, 2008	Face-to-face	National ¹⁰
United States	1309	3.3	Jan 18-27, 2008	Internet	National ¹¹

¹ In China, the survey was a national probability sample of urban telephone households across China. A stratified PPS sample design was developed to sample 20 cities; urban households represent approximately 45 percent of the Chinese population.

² In Egypt, the survey was executed in the urban areas of Cairo, Alexandria, Giza, and Subra. These four urbanized areas represent 75 percent of Egypt's urban population, which is 42 percent of the national population.

³ In India, a face-to-face survey was conducted in urban and rural areas in 14 of the largest Indian states; these states comprise 77 percent of India's population. The sample is 60 percent urban, India's population is approximately 30 percent urban.

⁴ In Indonesia, a national probability sample was conducted in both urban and rural areas and covering approximately 87 percent of Indonesia's population.

⁵ In Mexico, a random telephone sample of adults who had landline telephones was conducted in all 31 states and the Federal District. Telephone penetration in Mexico is 55 percent.

⁶ In Nigeria, the sample was developed by selecting six states, one per geographic region, based upon their size and representativeness. Within each state, sampling points were selected by means of a multi-stage random sample which disproportionately sampled urban areas. The final sample is 75 percent urban; Nigeria is approximately 50 percent urban.

⁷ In the Palestinian Territories, a face-to-face national probability survey was conducted among the population of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip.

⁸ In Russia, all items were half sampled; each item was answered by 800 respondents.

⁹ In Thailand, the survey was conducted in 10 provinces of the country including Bangkok, Samutprakarn, Chantaburi, Ratchaburi, Chiang Mai, Kampanget, Kornkean, Sakonnakorn, Chumporn, and Songkla.

¹⁰ In the Ukraine, all items were half-sampled; each item was answered by at least 1,020 respondents.

¹¹ In the United States, the poll was an online survey drawn from a nationally representative sample of the Knowledge Networks online panel. This panel is probabilistically-based, selected from the population of US telephone households and subsequently provided with an Internet connection if needed. Items in the US survey were split sampled so that each item was answered by at least 940 respondents.