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

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College Park, MD—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.

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,

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 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 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%).

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