

Feminism and the Expat Wife...

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Outwardly, Russian women and Western European women are much the same. Perhaps the former are a little more glitzy in their fashion choices, and [less conflicted](#) about the issue of wearing fur, but other than that the format of their lives is not so different. Generally they are faced with juggling work, family, love, ambition, etc. in much the same way as you might expect of women elsewhere.

Under the surface, however, expectations and Russian society norms are — for many women — slightly different to those that I — at least — have experienced back home. For example, at one of my Russian lessons the following happened:

It was a Monday morning, and Lyudmila, my teacher, was explaining to me that Russian nouns have different genders (dammit). Luckily — at least at the level at which I'm learning — there are various rules to help you work out which words are masculine, feminine and neuter. (Heaven forbid one might imagine that, as in basic French for example, only 2 of the 3 are regularly used. What? Did you imagine learning Russian was going to be *easy*?) As she explained it to me, the gender of most words can be worked out fairly easily; it simply

depends on how the word ends. There are some, however, that are irregular; they defy all the rules, and are feminine, masculine or neuter based on nothing other than that simply *are*.

In an effort to help out this ignorant foreigner, Lyudmila tried to give me some handy hints to use when trying to remember which gender these irregular nouns should be (when not being massacred by a clueless Brit):

Lyudmila: "So, bed and door are feminine. Even though their endings look like they could be masculine."

Me: "OK...."

Lyudmila: "The way I illustrate it is like this. The woman makes the bed — so it's feminine."

Me: "Right." (I let this pass — much as I would like to disagree, in our house it is me who makes the bed 90 percent of the time).

Lyudmila: "And, the woman opens the door to her husband when he gets home from work, so that's feminine too."

I look at her blankly. She looks back at me — equally blankly. Finally:

Me: "Ummm...?"

Lyudmila: "You *don't* open the door to your husband?"

Me: "Well, in England, traditionally men are supposed to hold open doors for women, so..."

Lyudmila: "Yes, yes I know. But at the end of the day when your husband comes home. You don't open the door up for him?"

Me: "Are you *crazy*? He can open it himself!"

Lyudmila looks at me. I look at her. And based on that she now thinks that I am a militant feminist. Whenever we discuss doors and beds in our Russian lessons, she raises her hand and makes a fist in a sort of Che Guevara type salute.

Note: I do think of myself of a feminist. But surely expecting my husband to open the front door himself at the end of the day can't be classified as militant? Unless, of course, you happen to live in Russia?

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