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Russian Women: Obey Thy Father, Husband, Son

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Yevsapia Sapega is happily living life as a Vedic woman.

Russia remains a conservative country where traditional gender paradigms dominate.

Rather than being admired for its progressive gender dynamics, Western society is seen as degenerate and ultimately doomed. As Russia has isolated itself from the West politically and economically, traditional values have been heralded as a hallmark of Russian society.

This trend has attracted businesses that capitalize on confining men and women to strict gender archetypes.

Destined to Be a Woman

"Working 10 hours a day and the right to vote haven't made women happy. [Neither have] the rights not to have children, not to get married, not to care about their homes. Women tried to achieve all this to prove something to men, but it doesn't make them happy," proclaim the writings of Olga Valyaeva, one of the gurus of the concept of Vedic womanhood, a concept that has grown in popularity among Russian women in recent years.

According to this concept — promoted by many lecturers and book authors, some of whom claim to be psychologists and doctors — the nature of a woman, as described in the ancient Indian manuscript of Veda, dictates that the only way for her to be happy is to put her husband and children first, abandoning career ambitions.

This doctrine has proven popular among Russian women. Valyaeva's group "Destiny to be a woman" on the Vkontatke social network has more than 200,000 members, and books and seminars by other prominent adepts are also successful.

Followers claim the popularity of this doctrine derives from the manuscript of Veda, but it is more likely an illustration of how patriarchal Russian society remains. When asked which are the most important things to have accomplished before reaching the age of 30, most Russians cite marriage and children, a poll released in late August by independent Russian pollster the Levada Center revealed.

Women's priorities were, first and foremost, to marry (77 percent of responders said so), give birth (75 percent) and only then receive an education (according to 60 percent of respondents).

"If you were born in a woman's body, you have certain features of your state of mind, you have certain obligations and talents. You can, of course, follow a man's path, popular nowadays, which means to achieve goals, earn money, but at some point it will impact your health, because a woman's body isn't designed for it, your mentality, because it would be overloaded, and your life," Valyaeva explained to The Moscow Times.

Valyaeva and other gurus like Oleg Torsunov, a dermatologist who now owns a health center in the southern city of Krasnodar, or Ruslan Narushevich, author of numerous online lectures on "true womanhood," claim women should first and foremost be homemakers. They should take responsibility for all housework, leave their jobs and care for their husbands and children.

Women should look attractive and always be in good spirits — because it pleases their husbands. Therefore, women should take care when selecting their clothing — long dresses or skirts are preferable — and frequent massage and beauty salons to better sustain a festive mood and nice figure, the Vedic ideology says.

Happy Husband, Happy Wife

"In 2013 my relationship with my husband almost came to a tragic end, and that's when I came across information about the Vedic view of a woman," Yevsapia Sapega, a young resident of the Karelian city of Petrozavodsk, told The Moscow Times.

"I was working a lot at the time, earned a lot and felt tired a lot. I couldn't understand why the money I earned didn't make me happy," she said.

Sapega, 22, worked as a project manager, was hostile towards her husband — she wanted him to be stronger and more powerful. "But I didn't realize back then that a man would only help a woman who needs help, not one that can do everything herself," she said.

After embracing the ideology of Vedic womanhood — she read about it in Torsunov's lectures — Sapega left her job and concentrated on her husband and home. She updated her wardrobe, wearing long skirts and was careful when conversing with her husband. "I tried to make every conversation inspiring for him and avoided complaints and scandals," she said.

Things quickly improved in her family. "Right now my husband has my job, and I support him. He agrees with me on the fact that I need to be home and not at work," she said. Sapega is mostly occupied with cooking, organizing entertainment for her husband and tailoring clothes for her family. She is happy with the changes and does not regret adopting the ideology of Vedic womanhood.

However, the ideology has been widely criticized by those who believe a woman's identity can be destroyed by subservience.

Depression as a Side Effect

The tale of Yevgenia Zadrutskaya, 32-year-old Muscovite who also tried to live the life of a Vedic woman, has a far from happy ending. Zadrutskaya was struggling through a difficult break-up when her friend introduced her to Vedic womanhood, via online materials.

"At first it all seemed very appealing — wearing beautiful dresses, indulging yourself with massages and not working, just being a happy woman," she told The Moscow Times.

She started listening to online lectures and taking part in webinars, and gradually changed her life entirely. "Over the course of it I quit my job as a psychologist and met my future husband, which was nice. I was breezing through life with my long skirts and cooking recipes, but after a year of this, I suddenly fell into a very deep depression," Zadrutskaya said.

She realized she was losing her identity and burying her hopes and ambitions — replacing the person she was before with a generic Vedic woman. "After some time I started to realize that for almost a year and a half I'd been repressing my own personal self, my true feelings, in order to follow the concept and always wear a smile. It took me another year to get over it and get back to being me," Zadrutskaya told The Moscow Times.

Zadrutskaya returned to her job and, among other things, began counseling women who also suffered from trying to be the model Vedic woman. "All sorts of disasters happen to these women — marriages ruined, families broken, relatives estranged, careers lost. A lot of women I consulted had nervous breakdowns and ended up in hospitals," she said.

Traditional vs. Unconventional

It's the usual battle between traditional values and non-traditional ones, believes Anton Sorin, a psychologist. "Since the very beginning of the 20th century people have been fighting

traditions and traditional values," he told The Moscow Times.

"Traditionalism is usually blamed for being too conservative, and people call for moving in the opposite direction. That's why historically there's always been a lot of movements like feminism, for instance," he said.

Progressive movements pledging to destroy traditional values incited opposing forces to call for preserving traditions, Sorin explained. "That's why nowadays in a society torn apart by different concepts and approaches to life, movements and ideologies that set traditional paths attract such interest. They provide hope for having a clear direction in life," he said.

This is the first of a two-part report by The Moscow Times on two movements promoting a return to traditional values. Read part two here.

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