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Who's to Blame for Gender Stereotypes in Russia?

It's not as simple as you might think.

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Andrei Lyubimov / Moskva News Agency

Today a man takes a risk when he writes about women — he might write something that comes off as sexism or male chauvinism. And his risk doubles when he writes about women just before March 8, International Women's Day, a holiday that has fallen out of favor with some people.

In the early 2000s, the Russian public said it was their third favorite holiday after New Year's and Victory Day, but today it's in fifth place after Easter and Christmas. In the old days it was considered a more important holiday than "men's day" on Feb. 23 (27 percent called March 8 important compared with 12 percent who considered Feb. 23 to be important).

Today only 16 percent call it important, while Feb. 23 is only down one percentage point to 11.

So instead of talking about women, on the eve of Women's Day, we're going to talk about men. Or rather, we're going to discuss how men describe their feelings about women.

To be more exact, we're going to consider what attitudes toward women can be reconstructed from their responses to Levada Center polls.

We'll begin with the question: "What do you value most in women?" This question was also asked about men, too, and in both cases the respondents could choose from 15 different traits and personality qualities.

Surveys show that all men, regardless of their marital or social status — young and old, highly educated and uneducated, married or unmarried — put being a good homemaker as the most important quality in a woman.

Gender-based roles and functions are very clearly supported in Russian society.

Men themselves place male domesticity down in eighth place while intelligence is in first place.

"*Gender inequality in Russia is not so much a function of men and women having different attitudes, but more because inequality has broader culture support.*"

When women are young, they value their appearance most of all, but by their thirties they give in to the dominant norms and admit that the most important quality in a woman is being a good homemaker.

But they agree that the most important quality in men is their intelligence. Women put a man's ability to make money in second place.

So, the man uses his brain to make money while his excellent homemaker wife puts the money to good use.

What else does a man need from his homemaker? While he's young, he wants her to be attractive. If he's older than 45, the importance of a woman's appearance slips down to fourth place. On the other side, by age 45 women have relegated their appearance to sixth place.

So, the average Russian man's idea of the ideal woman is a good homemaker first of all, and then attractive (to him and others). But in third place they want her to be faithful.

Surveys show that women want men to be faithful just about as much — they put it in third or fourth place. But that's where they part ways. Men do not expect to be faithful to their women — they put it from seventh to ninth place. And even women consider their own faithfulness less important than qualities like intelligence or caring for others.

Those are the main qualities that men value in their ideal women. What don't they want in a woman? Research shows that they don't particularly want to see in women what they value most in themselves: they put intelligence in sixth or seventh place in women. Even men with

higher educations want women to be more easygoing than smart.

Men mention women's sex appeal half as often as they mention her attractiveness, and women mention it two to four times less often. This may seem odd, since sex appeal and an attractive appearance are closely related, but researchers think this is a function of the taboo against publicly talking about sex.

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But there are two other topics that are not taboo — career success and independence. Young men value very highly their own striving for success and speak less about their independence. But only two out 100 young men value women who are career-minded, and only one out of a hundred values female independence.

Among older men this figure rises to two or three men out of 100. Level of education and marital status does not influence their basic concept of femininity: being a good homemaker is in first place and independence is in last place.

Young women place their own career success and independence fairly low on the scale (eighth or ninth place), but there are still more women who value those qualities in their female cohorts than there are among their male peers (10 and 2 percent, respectively).

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But as they get older, the number of women who value them falls to about 6 percent, presumably because those qualities are not reinforced by society.

This research shows how strongly the attitudes of men — including young men — tend toward domination, asymmetrical men's and women's roles, and even outright inequality.

But it shows just as clearly that these same attitudes are shared by women, especially among the older generation — that is, the mothers and grandmothers who raised these young men.

So, in the end, gender inequality in Russia is not so much a function of men and women having different attitudes, but more because inequality has broader culture support.

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