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**THE GENDER ROLE PERCEPTIONS OF FEMALE  
ADOLESCENTS IN GENDER-HOMOGENEOUS STUDENT  
GROUPS**

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***Abstract***

The article emphasizes the importance of researching the gender-related attitudes and behavioral patterns in modern society, with a focus on adolescence as a sensitive period for the formation of adequate gender-role perceptions that are important in terms of one's future family life and professional self-realization. Results of an empirical study of the gender-role perceptions of the female senior adolescents living and studying at Moscow All-Girls Boarding School of the Ministry of Defense of Russia are presented. The practice of integrating the gender-sensitive approach into the practice of monitoring the students' gender-role attitudes is described. The data obtained show: differences in the senior students' perception of the gender-related behavioral patterns and of the structure of female gender roles; importance of such behavioral patterns as emotional involvement in family relationships, compassion, care about physical attractiveness without emphasizing the need to meet the socially imposed female beauty standards. Attention is drawn to the fact that some of the perceived personality traits are the same for both parents regardless of their sex, with some other traits being perceived as special for a good mother or a good father. The author claims that the gender-homogeneous boarding-school educational environment, provided that the consistency of gender-sensitive teaching is achieved, ensures the formation of senior students' socially friendly gender-role perceptions, and positive flexible positions concerning gender and gender-roles, differentiated perceptions of motherhood, with preference given to traditional mother roles and with a clear tendency towards androgyny.

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**Keywords:** Adolescence, gender-sensitive approach, socialization, gender-role perceptions, femininity, parenthood.



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## 1. Introduction

Family and school have long been the two agents of socialization ensuring most of the process of children's and adolescents' self-identification and integration into society, with society's attitude towards family-related values being an indicator of safety and responsibility. However, the institutions of marriage and family have changed significantly over the past decades. We are witnessing the deformation of family-related values and attitudes, the distortion of family-related roles, and the disintegration of the traditional socialization space. The value and significance of the family as a social institution have been seriously undermined by these highly negative factors (Yegorycheva, 2018).

In today's world children and adolescents quite often find themselves in situations where they have to manifest or confirm their gender identity which is a very important part of their social identity. So it is natural that the school as a socializing agent plays a major role in forming the boys' and girls' gender identity. That is why it is very important to create at schools an education environment in which both formation and manifestation of one's gender identity are comfortable enough to maintain good social health. In this respect, single-sex boarding schools are of great interest to researchers, because single-sex teaching itself enables creating a safe gender-friendly environment.

## 2. Problem Statement

Moscow All-Girls Boarding School of the Ministry of Defense of Russia is the example of a single-sex educational institution. To socialize senior students and help them prepare for the performance of the social roles of a wife, mother, specialist and citizen, a gender-based learning and development program (hereinafter "the Program") has been developed and is being realized by the staff of the boarding school. The program is designed for senior students, with due consideration given to female personal and psycho-physiological characteristics identified and explored by specialists in gender psychology (Bem, 2004; Burn, 1996; Kletsina & Ioffe, 2017; Ilyin, 2003). The program aims to ensure students' successful socialization through development of their gender and citizenship competence. It is expected that students' positive gender identity perceptions will be formed to enable the students to counteract or avoid gender stereotyping in real-life situations, thereby ensuring their social role successful performance in future. The Program developers believe that if senior female students are aware of widely spread gender stereotypes and able to understand their meaning and origin, the stereotype threat will be reduced.

The Program provides for learning and development activities aimed at helping students understand the importance of social roles of women in modern Russian society, in particular the role of a mother which requires internalization of good role models as well as patterns of female behavior associated with Russian cultural and universal human values. That explains why the following subjects in the curriculum are compulsory for all students: world art & culture, music, choreography, figurative art, fashion and style basics, etiquette, cookery, needlework. Besides, within the framework of a "Guest Parlour" project, the students have an opportunity to meet and communicate with well-known scientists, politicians and doctors who have succeeded in finding the right balance between career, family and citizenship.

In developing the Program, we were aware of the fact that gender issues in education have been explored in many research works (Kluchko, 2019; Kletsina & Ioffe, 2017; Tikhomandritskaya, 2016; Chekalina, 2006; Shtyleva, 2009; Yarskaya-Smirnova & Romanov, 2006). The gender-sensitive approach as a methodological turn in education integrates research, analysis and educational practice aimed at achieving the gender equality as the state of ease of access to resources and opportunities regardless of sex, as well as consideration of the existing gender differences (Kluchko, 2019).

### **3. Research Questions**

- To evaluate the effectiveness of learning and development activities, regular monitoring is conducted to determine whether the educational environment is gender-friendly enough to ensure the integration of the personality-oriented approach into the learning and development process.
- In 2018, a questionnaire-based survey research of the girls' femininity and female role perceptions was conducted to see whether they feel comfortable with their gender identity.

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

Considering the importance of the environmental factors that influence the formation of gender-related perceptions, we assumed that the gender-role perceptions of the students living in an all-girls boarding school and studying in a gender-homogeneous educational environment are most likely to be homogeneous in their character and maximally close to the social ideals.

### **5. Research Methods**

#### **5.1. Selection**

Data were obtained from 187 respondents who were 9th and 10th grade students living and studying at Moscow All-Girls Boarding School of the Ministry of Defense of Russia. The students are mostly daughters of military officers serving in different parts of Russia.

#### **5.2. Survey Methods**

We used the following tools designed by Russian gender psychologists Kletsina and Ioffe (2017): "Female Gender-Role Norms" Questionnaire; "Traditional Parenthood Attitudes" Form and "Parent-Daughter and Parent-Son Relationships" Form.

The questionnaires help identify a system of femininity and female gender-role perceptions encouraging one to act in accordance with them and avoid things contradicting them. We assumed that femininity refers to a set of personal and behavioral characteristics associated with stereotyped traits of women: mildness, caregiving, gentleness, weakness, defenselessness, etc. Inasmuch as the social norms (including stereotypical perceptions of femininity) internalized in adolescence are most likely to be the norms which the girls will follow in their future family relationships, it is very important to monitor the formation of female adolescents' femininity and female gender-role perceptions in order to predict their future family-, work-, and citizenship-related behaviors and plan the teacher interventions needed to reduce the possibility of unwanted formation of the socially irresponsible or antisocially-punished

patterns of gender identity (e.g. girls having socially accepted femininity perceptions may be disliked or hated by their peers with socially unaccepted femininity perceptions, no matter if the latter are expressed or hidden).

The used survey response scales correlate with traditional femininity ideological norms: 1) focusing on marriage and maternity; 2) importance of physical attractiveness; 3) desire to be good at housekeeping; 4) readiness to take care of family members and dear ones; 5) sensitivity, mildness, compliance, weakness, defenselessness.

## 6. Findings

The data show that among the respondents surveyed, one-third stick to the traditional femininity norms and one-fourth stick to egalitarian norms. 45% respondents show respect for both traditional and egalitarian norms, which is indicative of the mixed character of femininity norms, not allowing the girls to stick to one of the diametrically opposed norms.

Almost half of the respondents (46%) have high scores on the “Readiness to Take Care of Family Members and Dear Ones” scale. This means that the all-girls boarding school senior students believe that caregiving, creating an emotionally supportive family environment, and the well-being of all family members are something that women are to be responsible for. Another 13% believe that care tasks should be distributed within a family, with the care of senior-aged or seriously ill family members to be received from paid social services.

The high scores on the “Mildness and Sensitivity” scale indicate that compliance, helpfulness and modesty are seen by the respondents (15%) as most valued personality traits in women. The low scores on the same scale may be indicative of the fact that some respondents (18%) perceive women’s self-confidence and dominance quite normal and not contradicting femininity. The average scores indicate that senior grade students (two-thirds of the respondents) believe that masculine and feminine traits should be integrated into a woman’s personality.

There is a widespread view that a true woman should be slim, well-groomed, charming and attractive. Physical appearance is indeed a very important component of a woman’s self-concept. However, the social norms requiring women to be valued for young age, slim body and physical attractiveness can damage a female adolescent’s self-esteem and hinder the formation of a positive self-concept unless she meets the unattainable beauty standards.

The results concerning the “Physical Attractiveness Importance” scale show that every fourth respondent stresses the importance of face and body grooming. Slightly more respondents (27%) believe that it is not necessary for a woman to stick to the beauty standards propagated through media. Almost half of the girls (47%) reported that physical attractiveness is very important but failure to meet the beauty standards should not lower a woman’s self-esteem.

Marriage and maternity are generally viewed as a basis for the “right” female behavior, which is evidenced by the following Russian speech cliché: “Every woman must be married to become a mother”. Traditionally, a woman’s success in life depends mainly on whether she gets married and pregnant at the «right time». To most people, a true woman is a mother first of all («I as woman and mother...”). The

socially imposed woman's predisposition to maternal-role performance is widely considered to be a woman's dominant predestination and meaning of existence (Kletsina & Ioffe, 2017).

The results obtained for the "Maternity & Marriage Priority" scale show that slightly more than half of the respondents (54%) are ready to balance work-related and family-related roles. About a third of the girls surveyed (27%) reported readiness to make their future career a priority without thinking that their future profession might be less important than family. Every fifth respondent (19%) sticks to traditional views and are focused on self-realization as a wife and mother.

For the all-girls boarding school students, to acquire housekeeping skills that are expected to be required in their future adult life (cooking, tidying up, homemaking), special lessons are conducted. That explains why the scores on the "Good Housekeeping" scale is high. 41% girls adhere to the traditional view that a woman must be good at housekeeping. The average and low scores on the same scale indicate that the respondents think it would be possible to distribute the household chores among all family members. Such modern views are adhered to by more than half of the respondents (59%).

The data obtained for the "Dependence / Self-sufficiency in Male-Female Relationships" scale allowed us to conclude that more than half of the respondents (58%) are sure that women have their own tools of influence. A fifth of the respondent are sure that a woman should hide her competence and let men take the initiative. Another fifth adhere to the egalitarian view that a woman is able to be self-sufficient and independent in making every day-life and vitally important decisions.

The traditional vs modern parental values as perceived by the all-girls boarding school senior students are of great interest to both psychologists and teachers. To understand perceptions and beliefs about these values, we used the following two scales: "Long-Distance Fathering, Indirect / Direct Father-Child Interactions / Father Accessibility" and "Strict Father Model / Father's Emotional Involvement during Father-Child Interaction". The data for these scales indicates that father accessibility and father's emotional involvement during interaction with the child are perceived as important by the respondents. Such attitudes reflect values of modern society. At the same time, the results of the study show the respondents' adherence to traditional views on motherhood. Thus, they believe that family and maternity are woman's priorities for which career progression can be sacrificed.

The girls participating in the study have clearly demonstrated their preference for modern parent-child relationships. The majority of them don't think it is necessary to consider sex-related differences in child rearing, instead focusing their attention on the importance of interchangeability of their future family and job roles, and of creating an enabling environment to ensure the development of a child's potential and talents regardless of his or her sex.

To identify the correlation between the gender-role norms which the respondents stick to and the structure of the respondents' parental attitudes, a correlation analysis was conducted to determine the correlation between the data obtained using the "Female Gender-Role Norms" Questionnaire and the "Parent-Daughter and Parent-Son Relationships" Form. For calculating the results, Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was used. The results of the correlation analysis are presented in Table 1.

**Table 01.** Coefficients of rank correlation between the “Female Gender-Role Norms” Questionnaire subscales and the characteristics of parent-daughter and parent-son relationships

Subscales of “Female Gender-Role Norms” Questionnaire	Characteristics of parent-daughter and parent-son relationships	
	traditional	modern
Marriage & maternity priority in life	0,440**	-0,354**
Desire to be good at housekeeping	0,413**	-0,214*
Physical attractiveness importance	0,307**	-0,266*
Readiness to take care of family members and dear ones	0,502**	-0,279**
Mildness and sensitivity	0,473**	-0,366**
Dependence / self-sufficiency in male-female relationships	0,409**	-0,308**
Total score for traditional femininity commitment	0,535**	-0,382**

Note: \*\* rank correlation significance not less than 0,01

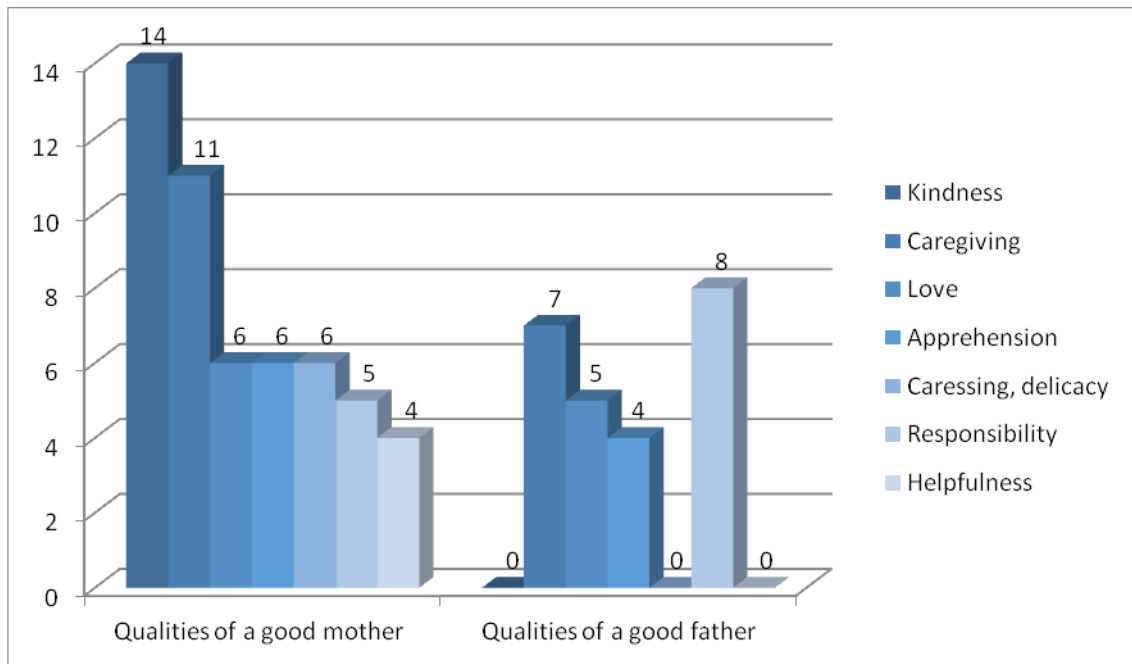
\* rank correlation significance not less than 0,05

A significant correlation between the characteristics of parent-daughter and parent-son relationships was identified for all subscales of the “Female Gender-Role Norms” Questionnaire.

Regarding the parent-daughter and parent-son relationships, the respondents believe that it is normal for parents to share parenting responsibilities.

The analysis of the data obtained using “Female Gender-Role Norms” Questionnaire and “Parent-Daughter and Parent-Son Relationships” Form allowed us to conclude that the respondents sticking to the traditional female gender norms are most likely to follow the tradition of raising boys and girls differently, considering the same-sex parent-child attachment to be very important for preparing kids for adulthood and successful performance of sex-dependent family and social roles. Conversely, the respondents with modern views of female gender-role norms are not likely to focus on raising boys and girls differently, considering it more important to develop children’s potential and talents regardless of their sex, and to prepare them for future performance of interchangeable family and job roles.

In studying the social perceptions of “a good father” and of “a good mother”, 930-word associations were obtained for the qualities of a good father and the same number of word associations for the qualities of a good mother. The distribution of the data is presented in the form of a diagram in Figure 01.



**Figure 01.** Structure of the respondents’ perceptions of the personality traits of a good father and of a good mother (% of the total number of respondents)

The analysis of the respondents’ perceptions of a good father and a good mother show that they have modern views of fatherhood. The concept of a good father primarily comprises responsibility, caregiving, love, involvement in child-rearing and in the child’s life, apprehension.

Fairness and humor are perceived by the respondents as the most important characteristics of a good father, whereas kindness and responsiveness are the characteristics which the respondents most frequently associate with a good father. This is also indicative of the respondents’ modern views of fatherhood.

Most word associations with a good father in the peripheral area of the “Parent-Daughter and Parent-Son Relationships” Form’s changing variables refer not so much to father’s role as to men’s personality characteristics in general (material well-being, patience, perseverance, strong will). This can be explained by the fact that the respondents’ perceptions of fatherhood become integrated into their perceptions of what it is to be a man.

The respondents’ perceptions of a good mother include such characteristics as kindness, caressing, delicacy, love, apprehension, responsibility, helpfulness. These characteristics are different from those integrated into the perceptions of a good father. However, such characteristics as responsibility, caregiving, love, and apprehension are the same for a good father and a good mother. Hence the respondents perceive the ideal parents as almost identical to each other, regardless of parents’ sex.

A possible area of the “Parent-Daughter and Parent-Son Relationships” Form’s changing variables include such personality traits as self-sacrifice, wisdom, tidiness, responsiveness, sincerity, honesty, thriftiness (being good at housekeeping and homemaking), intelligence. The majority of associations to the phrase “a good mother” are related to the perceived traits of a good woman that are not associated with the parental role. Some of the personality traits included in the possible area of changing variables (intelligence, responsiveness, honesty) coincide with those in the similar area for the traits of a good

father, i.e. the personality traits of good parents are perceived by the respondents regardless of parents' sex. Besides, the study showed that the girls perceive self-sacrifice as the most valuable personality trait of a good woman, i.e. the one who is ready to sacrifice herself for her children and husband. It is evident that self-sacrifice, as well as thriftiness and tidiness are personality traits that are closely related to the traditional femininity.

## 7. Conclusion

The results of the study allow us to conclude that the senior female adolescents living and studying at an all-girls boarding school have balanced and consistent perceptions of gender-related norms, with a clear tendency towards either androgyny or traditional femininity. The students' views about their future adult life integrate career and family, with maternity-related attitudes being differentiated. The formation of such socially friendly perceptions and views is only possible if a gender-sensitive educational environment is created and a gender-sensitive approach is integrated into the teaching practice.

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