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What do women want?

Many of my friends find this question rather hackneyed (like “Would you travel to Mars one day?”, “Would you change places with a Miss Universe?” or “Imagine you won/inherited a million bucks. What would you do?”).

Moreover, they find this question rather annoying. The other ones, in my friends' view, usually come from curious children or young girls, who seem too concerned about their looks, or, finally, from people who are sick and tired of their dead-end jobs or dreary daily tasks. Hardly anybody will feel uncomfortable answering questions like these. However, being asked about what women want — if you are yourself a woman — is not very enjoyable. One of my old classmates, for example, sees red every time she hears these words and strongly believes that nobody but those “clueless and insensitive men” will ask such a blunt question instead of trying to figure out what we (as you can guess, *intelligent and responsive*) women really need.

To be honest, I am far from agreeing with her. For one thing, even sensitive and quick-witted men cannot read women's minds yet. And even if they could do it — like Mel Gibson's character in a well-known romantic comedy (I am sure that many of you remember the title of this movie and, to some degree, its plot) — that would definitely not be to our benefit. So, asking your partner about their preferences, even in a blunt manner, is quite reasonable. Silence is not always golden. However, the question itself and, what is more, numerous attempts to find a one-size-fits-all solution to this “issue”, seem a little awkward to me. First of all, because I am not inclined to make generalisations, be they gender-, age-, or ethnicity-based, or the like. For this reason, I take with a pinch of salt all kinds of self-help books or manuals claiming to be “the ultimate and only guide to getting girls and to understand women once and for all”¹.

¹ For instance: Anton, W. (2010). *The manual: What women want and how to give it to them*. Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

On the other hand, if we tried to be more specific and identified women's preferences for particular things (such as holiday gifts) or their attitudes towards particular phenomena (e. g. the wife's role in marriage), we could build up more or less realistic profile of our women and, furthermore, better understand our society itself.

Obviously, this was what a research team at the **Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS)** had aimed to do. In the first half of February 2019, they carried out a nationwide survey focused just on gifts for International Women's Day. Given that 8 March is one of the most celebrated holidays in Ukraine, the survey was conducted at a very opportune moment. Even if most men had already decided what to buy for their significant others, the survey findings might have given a useful tip on picking the best gift and so might have made some men change their decision. Besides, the answers of women who took part in the survey could have served as a guideline for those who did not have a clear idea of what to buy for this holiday.

Structurally, the survey consisted of two questions. One of them, "What would you most like to present to your partner for 8 March?" was addressed to men while the other, "What would you most like to receive as an 8 March gift from your partner?" – to women. In total, 2,042 respondents aged over 18 were interviewed. The study covered all Ukraine's regions, except for the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and non-government controlled areas in the East.

So, what did the KIIS team find out about women's gift preferences and men's willingness to buy a particular thing as a gift? First, flowers topped the list of Women's Day presents: about 23% of women would like to receive them for 8 March and 32% of men were going to buy them, which is actually not surprising. The second most popular gift was jewelry: around 7% of women would like their partners to present them with a necklace, ring, bracelet, earrings, etc., and the same proportion of men were willing to purchase these things. Then, 6% of women chose perfume and cosmetics over the other options, and 5% of men intended to buy these items. 5% of women and 3% of men opted for money as a gift. Romantic dinner, as well as romantic journey, was popular with 5% of women and the same share of men. Things that involve considerable expenses (like an automobile or an apartment) were regarded as 8 March gifts by only 2% of women, and about the same number of men were ready to buy a car or a house for their significant others. 13% of women reported that they did not have someone to receive a gift from; 10% of men were in the same position and therefore did not plan to buy anything.

So, at this juncture, we can state that there is some balance between women's expectations and men's plans (in other words, finances) – when it comes to buying presents. Yet, there is one thing left to note: 12% of women wanted a little more attention and a kind word instead of any other presents, but only half as many men (6%) had realised the power of these intangible gifts¹.

Well, do Ukrainian women differ from their Western or former Soviet counterparts – I mean, in terms of gift preferences? If we glance through the data of a survey undertaken by the Yuri Levada Analytical Centre in February 2014, we may conclude that differences between Russian and Ukrainian women, though

¹ For more detail see press release by Tetiana Piaskovska at <http://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=829&page=1&t=8>.

not vast, do exist. For instance, 13% of female respondents in Russia said they would like to receive money (more than twice as many in Ukraine) in order to pick a present on their own. Nobody viewed their partner's attention as a gift — since this “item” had not been included on the list of gift options. In addition, there was a mismatch between the receiver's expectations and the giver's intentions in several positions: only 9% of men were going to give money to their wives or girlfriends for 8 March; 7% of them were ready to purchase jewelry, whereas nearly twice as many women (13%) wished to receive these valuable things. As for flowers, the picture is quite different: 53% of men said that they would buy them for 8 March, but only 42% of women would be pleased with such a present¹.

Still, I am not going to draw comparisons between women of the two countries. First, the sample size in the Russian case was smaller (1,603 respondents) than in Ukrainian. Second, it would be absolutely unreasonable to make inferences using only one criterion.

Anyway, the holiday lasts only a few days — and then back to everyday life, which is not a piece of cake. And what makes the life of a married couple both monotonous and stressful are household tasks, especially if they are not properly divided. Even in economically and socially advanced countries such as the USA or the UK women still bear the brunt of household labour. As a rule, they have to either combine full-time work and raising children, or reduce their careers for the sake of the family. For example, a 2013 Pew Research Center survey revealed that, among parents with at least some work experience, mothers with children under age 18 were about three times as likely as fathers to say that being a working parent made it harder for them to advance in their job or career (51% vs. 16%)². Further, according to an in-depth study performed by the UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) Sloan Center on Everyday Lives and Families, even in families where women worked equivalent or longer hours and earned higher salaries they still took on more domestic responsibilities. Women spent 22% of their time on housework and carried out 67% of household tasks (for men, those figures were 18% and 33% respectively)³. The results of the 2010–1 UK Household Longitudinal Study are even more disquieting: out of 8,500 couples interviewed, fewer than 7% of couples shared housework equally⁴. Such unfairness, stemming from rigid gender roles, enormously affects the quality of life of married women and eventually destroys the family itself: lots of couples break up within the first several years of marriage, and one of the major causes of this situation is, again, spouses' failure to coordinate their household activities.

¹ For more detail see:

<https://www.levada.ru/2014/03/05/podarki-k-mezhdunarodnomu-zhenskomu-dnyu>.

² Parker, K. (2015). Despite progress, women still bear heavier load than men in balancing work and family. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/03/10/women-still-bear-heavier-load-than-men-balancing-work-family>.

³ Klein, W., Izquierdo, C., & Bradbury, T. N. (2013). The difference between a happy marriage and miserable one: Chores. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2013/03/the-difference-between-a-happy-marriage-and-miserable-one-chores/273615>.

⁴ Bodkin, H. (2019). Women still performing bulk of household chores, survey finds. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/07/25/women-still-perform-bulk-household-chores-survey-finds>.

Gender stereotypes have not been overcome in Ukraine either. As a relatively recent KIIS survey found¹, women shoulder the full burden of housework in almost 70% of families. About half of these women (49.3%) would like to “equally share household chores and parenting” with their husbands, but only 22% of men said they would not mind doing that. The majority of male respondents (56.5%) were only ready to take on some household responsibilities and play a more active role in raising children. However, there were 9.9% of men agreeing to do most of the housework and perform the parenting duties, which may be considered a good beginning.

The survey also revealed that respondents from different regions hold different views on their duties as a family member. In the East, 33% of men expressed their readiness to take on half of the household tasks and childcare. The West and the South turned out to be a little more conservative in this regard — only 23.9% and 22.7%, respectively, reported they were willing to do it. The lowest figure (12%) was recorded for the central parts of Ukraine. Apart from the above, 8.3% of male respondents in the West, 7.9% in the South and 2.5% in the Centre said that they were not inclined to help their wives run the household.

This study was conducted from 11 to 21 September 2015 across Ukraine, except for the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and non-government controlled areas in the East. 2,041 randomly selected respondents aged over 18 filled in the questionnaire. Another point worth noting is that the survey was initiated by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology within the framework of the “**Four Hands Happiness**” project launched by the UN Population Fund in Ukraine and the Ministry of Social Policy.

The goal of this project is to break down a widespread attitude that the wife has the sole responsibility for family well-being and, as the name suggests, to promote a new, more progressive model of marriage, which is based on a fair division of household and child-rearing duties between the two spouses. In fact, these are the essential steps towards a stable and harmonious marriage.

“Four Hands Happiness” has enjoyed popularity among Ukrainians. You might have come across or listened to stories of men (including music and sports stars) who pride themselves on being actively involved in raising their children and thus set an example to other fathers. You might also have seen several inspirational posters that feature happy couples tidying up the flat or making lunch together. Smiling warmly, they assure everyone looking at them that “together is easier” and show what genuine happiness looks like.

Perhaps, that sounds a little trite, but I really believe that family happiness is made by four hands.

Because, to my mind, splitting household chores is not only about reducing women’s domestic workload.

It is not so much about preventing arguments over dirty dishes, an overflowing rubbish bin or your child’s poor performance in maths.

It is not so much about creating a favourable environment for women’s career advancement either.

Rather, it is about acknowledgement of what your wife does every day to keep the family operating smoothly — and what still goes unrewarded.

¹ For more detail see: <http://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=563&page=1&t=8>.

Yes, it is about recognition of housework as real work. Even though officials have not put a value on domestic labour yet, it is entirely up to you to deservedly value your wife's contribution to the family and make her feel appreciated.

Finally, that means *fairness* and *respect* – things that are of primary importance to most people, including women.

In a sense, it sounds like quite an appropriate answer to the question posed at the beginning, doesn't it?

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The paper presents some data from social surveys conducted (in different years) by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, the Yuri Levada Analytical Centre and other well-known organisations such as Pew Research Center and UCLA Sloan Center on Everyday Lives of Families (USA). The focus of the research was on the following issues: women's preferences in 8 March gifts, their current role in the family, as well as the attitudes towards sharing household chores and parenting. According to the results, a considerable number of families (both in Ukraine and in other countries) are still guided by stereotypical ideas about division of household and child-rearing duties. However, social projects like "Four Hands Happiness" give us confidence that these views will gradually be transformed in favour of a new model of family based on the principle of gender equality.

Keywords: *social survey, women, family responsibilities, gender roles, gender stereotypes*