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In Russia, Men Die Young, Leaving Women With Bad Choices

October 15, 2016 by Svetlana Shkolnikova



Because of a shortage of men from early deaths in Russia, women are forced to stay in abusive relationships, believing that they are lucky to “get men,” an expert said. Muscovites, above, on the metro, 2016. ROY THANIAGO/CREATIVE COMMONS

For every girl born in Russia today, so are 1.06 boys.

The gender ratio at birth is consistent with the international average of 1.07 boys for every girl, but the similarities end there.

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The trend repeats itself in Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania and Ukraine, where there are 84.8 to 86.8 men per 100 women, according to the 2015 [revision](#) of “World Population Prospects,” by the Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

Among the world’s more developed regions, the gender ratio stands at 94.9 men per 100 women.

This chasm between the West and the former Soviet Union became profoundly pronounced after World War II, when the Soviet Union lost an estimated 27 million people, 20 million of them men, and has persisted, to a lesser degree, through the collapse of the Soviet Union through the present because of a high male mortality rate that experts blame on unhealthy lifestyles rather than on war.

Female-heavy populations are typically attributed to factors related to fertility, migration and mortality, said Jens-Hagen Eschenbaecher, a regional communications adviser at the UN Population Fund office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia. But in many of the former Soviet nations, the predominant factor is men’s propensity to die young, especially at age 40 and older, from widespread alcohol use, smoking, suicide, cardiovascular and circulatory diseases and accidents often linked to alcohol.

While Russian girls born last year are expected to live to 76.3 years old, the World Health Organization (WHO) has predicted a life span of just 64.7 years for Russian boys. The 11.6-year gap is the largest in the world, followed by Belarus’s 11.5 years and Lithuania’s 11 years.

Only Rwanda and Syria rivaled Ukraine’s gap of 9.8 years and Latvia’s 9.6 years.

Alcohol consumption, which increased dramatically after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, as many people struggled to cope with the loss of economic stability, remains exceptionally high, causing more than 30 percent of deaths in Russia in 2012, according to WHO data.

A 2013 survey by the Pew Research Center found a stark gender divide in attitudes toward drinking, with 52 percent of women deeming it morally unacceptable, compared with 36 percent of men.

hand-in-hand, said Judith Shapiro, an economics tutor at the School of Economics and Political Science, who researched demographic trends in Russia.

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“People ask why, if it was hot in Moscow in 2011, were there more drownings, and we explain that when people go swimming in the Moscow River, first they get very drunk and then they jump in,” she said.

Smoking also significantly chips into the male mortality rate, affecting more men than women (60 percent compared with 22 percent, according to WHO’s 2009 Global Adult Tobacco Survey), and is particularly popular among young people in some former Soviet republics.

The Ministry of Health in Belarus reported in 2014 that more than 65 percent of Belarusian university and high-school students smoked, incentivized by lax regulations and low prices.

Coupled with suicide levels that skew heavily male, topping 80 percent in Latvia in 2010 and 65 percent in Lithuania in 2013, and an aging population with a low fertility rate, the scarcity of men in Russia and its western neighbors has perpetuated the belief, among both women and men, that “women are very lucky to get men,” according to Shapiro.

That mentality can trap women in abusive relationships out of fear of ending up single and affect the stability of existing marriages, said Elizabeth Brainerd, a professor of economics and women’s, gender and sexuality studies at Brandeis University in Waltham, Mass.

“When there’s an excess of women, it diminishes women’s bargaining power even within marriage, because you sort of have to put up with more bad behavior if you want to stay in the marriage and there aren’t many options for you but your husband has a lot of options,” Brainerd said.

Domestic violence, often incited by alcohol, is not only rampant in Russian relationships, affecting up to one in three women, says the ANNA National Center for the Prevention of Violence, in Moscow, but commonly accepted by the government and the general populace as the norm.

“There’s a tradition that men are like that, that that’s what you expect,” Shapiro said. “Your father hit your mother, but they loved each other and made up.”

In a 2013 Russian [survey](#) of 10,000 women on reproductive health, more than a third of respondents, or 37 percent, said they accepted a husband’s right to use physical force against his wife.

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mortality rate primarily lands on women upon the death of their
ny older women face poverty from low pensions, Eschenbaeche
d.

Those low sums reflect the salaries women received during their working life because of gender pay gaps, career breaks and informal work without pension benefits, such as unpaid housework and child care.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, denounced Russia in March for promoting gender-based discrimination through legislation that bars women from 456 occupations and 38 branches of industry considered too dangerous, arduous or harmful to women and their reproductive health.

Occupational segregation influenced by the government's repeated emphasis on the role of women as mothers and caregivers keeps many women stuck in low-paid professions and earning just 67.2 percent of their male counterparts' average income, despite being better educated, more experienced and more productive, according to the International Labor Organization's 2014 Global Wage Report.

Correcting the gender ratio and mitigating its effects on women would require adopting a different attitude toward life, Shapiro said, by offering mental health treatment that equips men with better coping mechanisms and changing a macho, antistate culture that encourages risky behavior and sometimes disregards health and safety advice from the government.

Eschenbaecher said that reforming health systems and increasing awareness campaigns, especially for noncommunicable diseases, are crucial for closing the life expectancy gender gap in Russia.

Shapiro said she was cautiously optimistic about such progress, citing a quote from a French visitor to Russia in the 19th century that laments the country's tendency to adopt Western values and policies, "but with a gap of 40 years."

Svetlana Shkolnikova

Svetlana Shkolnikova is a staff writer for the Gannett/USA Today Network and has previously written about gender equality for the International Women's Initiative, a nonprofit group dedicated to eradicating human-rights violations against women. Her byline has also appeared in USA Today, The Baltimore Sun, The (Bergen) Record, publications of the National Education Association and more.

In 2013, Shkolnikova reported on religion and culture for TASS, the Russian news agency, while on a fellowship with the International Center for Journalists and the

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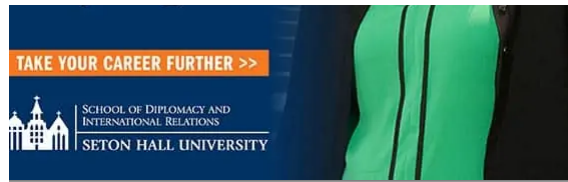
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