Evolving Attitudes toward Single Motherhood in the UK and Russia

Results in Brief

Society’s perception of single mothers in Russia and the United Kingdom

A novel way of assessing sociocultural perceptions of single motherhood is revealing interesting contrasts between the United Kingdom and Russia.

Single motherhood in many countries has undergone, or is currently experiencing, a process of normalisation: mothers are no longer subject to social negative attitudes, and their children are not bullied due to their unconventional family structures. But the reasons for and features of this normalisation vary significantly across countries.

For instance, in English-speaking literature, this normalisation is reflected in the diversity of fiction, including children’s picture books and young adult literature. The SingleMother project has been considering the contrast between the United Kingdom and Russia, and what is driving that perception.

“In Russia, normalisation of single motherhood has been intertwined with pronatalist policies since the Soviet era. While it took a considerable period for single mothers to be culturally accepted, they are now regarded as vital members of society. This acceptance is driven by their role in replenishing the population, aligning with the major concerns of modern Russian demographic policy,” says Dmitrii Sergeev,
principal investigator of the project, who conducted his research at the University of Cambridge, in the United Kingdom.

But the project found that parallels can be drawn between the Soviet era and contemporary Russia, revealing a recurring double-standard attitude.

On one hand, the authorities do not exert pressure on single mothers, recognising their societal importance. On the other hand, there is a noticeable conservative shift towards traditional values and families, echoing a familiar narrative of societal expectations. This juxtaposition highlights the complexity of the normalisation process, and the challenges single mothers continue to face despite changing attitudes.

**Tracing paradoxical attitudes to single motherhood**

Sergeev, who received support from the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions programme, turned to online retail giant Amazon to get an idea of what people were searching for, and what the books they were buying contained.

He curated a diverse collection of books readily available for anyone seeking literature on single mothers. This assortment comprised 32 non-fiction books, 48 targeted at teenagers and young adult readers, and 62 children’s picture books. Spanning the years 2000 to 2020, these works presented single mothers as either principal or supporting characters.

“Delving into these texts, my attention was devoted to discerning patterns, repetitive symbols, elements, and the nuanced use of words and images in depicting single mothers. A particular emphasis was placed on children’s picture books, where my investigation extended beyond the textual realm to scrutinise the visual representation of single mothers,” explains Sergeev.

Putting single motherhood in the perspective of Soviet-Russian history allowed Sergeev to demonstrate how the society has developed an ambivalent stance towards women.

As he notes: “This stance or attitude can be characterised through a set of rules or a cultural code that prescribes acceptable and unacceptable behaviour patterns for single mothers. Only if a woman forgets about her own happiness, rejects attention from other men and neglects her beauty and health, concentrating fully on raising her child, is she accepted as a full-fledged member in society.”

**Raising awareness of the challenges faced by single mothers**
Sergeev argues that understanding these dynamics is pivotal for communities, providing them with insights to challenge and overturn prevailing stereotypes.

“A compelling example is evident in the actions of single mothers by choice, who create and share their own children’s picture books and self-help literature, offering a positive portrayal of their experiences.”

Sergeev also wanted to alert policymakers to the needs and well-being of single mothers. While existing legislation may provide some protection, the focus at both international and national levels tends to centre primarily on children, neglecting the unique challenges faced by single mothers themselves.

To address this disparity, he feels that there is a need to advocate a more ‘mother-focused’ approach when crafting policies, and that decision makers need to ensure policies take into account, and reflect, the experiences of single mothers.

“By achieving these two goals, I hope to contribute towards a more inclusive and supportive environment for single mothers globally,” says Sergeev.

Keywords

SingleMother, Russia, normalisation, challenges, society, stereotypes
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