

Wanted: Soderzhanka

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A Russian film director was recently interviewed and asked why he had cast two foreign women in his film. He explained that it was hard to find good Russian actresses in their 30s as most young women in the early 1990s didn't want to go into the poorly paid profession. They, he added bitterly, just wanted to be a soderzhanka.

Put a ".ru" on the end of that word if you don't know it, and you will find a web site devoted to the "kept woman," a phrase that in English sounds old-fashioned, the kind of word to be used by two nosey neighbors in a black-and-white movie set from the 1960s.

In Russian, one dictionary also describes it as of archaic use, but judging by the adverts on show it is one that still comes in handy.

The web site transliterates the Russian word as soderganki, making it sound like a painful tropical disease, but there are only dreams, aspirations and eyeballs with dollar signs in the site under that name.

The web site takes great pains to separate being a prostitute from being a soderzhanka, an

etymological debate that indeed has raged for centuries. It features stories that could grace any women's mag of the "How I became a kept woman and grew to love it," or "Your guide to becoming a kept woman," soft-core porn photos on every page and classified ads to match the keeper with the wannabe kept.

The ads mix the banal — "I need a regular lover," says a man in St. Petersburg — with the scarily specific.

The women are the flirtiest. "I love shopping, cocktails and perfumes," says Coco. Guess what she didn't add, you're paying for it. Coco also says she loves flying and wants a patron or keeper who can take her to Britain, especially London, often.

Only one of the females actually mentions the sex: "My favorite hobby is lively consensual sex and getting expensive presents," writes Anna.

The scale of sodergankerism, a word that will only ever appear in this column, is hard to tell, but there are adverts from a number of men in provincial Russian cities including the dark, polluted mess of Norilsk.

Oleg is "tired of family routine" and is ready to "offer a dignified relationship" and "not just that." Dmitry doesn't mind if a girl is in a relationship, but she must have "free time during the day." Presumably because his wife doesn't let him out at night.

Georgy wins the trying-to-be-cute prize for his ad where he promises "denezhniye prezentiki," or "little-ickle money presents," in return.

The site cites unsourced statistics, including that 70 percent of St. Petersburg students would like to be a soderzhanka. They contrast this with a figure of 20 percent in the 1980s. This is a positive for them.

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