

Don't Say It

Sex, money, and the taboos that haunt conversations in Russia and around the world

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They say “sex sells,” but don't go peddling it near dinner tables in Russia, where families in an ostensibly conservative society say the subject is too taboo to discuss at home.

A new study conducted by the independent pollster Levada Center reveals that 33 percent of Russians today refuse to talk about sex with their relatives, calling it “inappropriate.” According to the poll, sex is more than twice as unpopular a discussion topic as any other taboo, with suicide (at 15 percent) and death (at 7 percent) distant runners-up.

In Soviet times, the state strictly regulated family and sexual relations, in both moral and legal terms, Levada sociologist Karina Papiya told The Moscow Times.

“Even though this system is long gone, the tendency to regulate this sphere remains,” Papiya explained. “Orthodox rhetoric and its conservative views on what is appropriate and what is not contribute to the trend. It also correlates with the ‘traditional values’ ideology promoted by the government.”

As a result, any issue related to sex — whether it’s birth control, sex education, or gay rights — is swept under the rug in schools. This is also true even within families and among friends. Talking about sex issues as something normal is assumed to be dirty and indecent, Papiya says.

This atmosphere has taken hold in a country with a notoriously high number of abortions, and where people have welcomed recent laws banning the “propaganda” of so-called “nontraditional sexual relationships,” which essentially banishes the LGBT community from public life.

No Sex Talk in Asia or the Arab World

By treating talk of sex and sexuality as a taboo, Russia acts a lot like some Asian countries.

In April 2016, Ningxin Wang, a communications researcher at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, published research on the topic of sexuality in parent-adolescent communication in Chinese families. She found that families in China usually avoid discussing sex, even when it comes to the traditional parent-child conversation about dating. Chinese parents try to pass on their values and expectations “indirectly, implicitly, and/or nonverbally,” Wang concluded.

It so happens that Chinese adolescent children share their parents’ reticence to discuss the birds and the bees, and actively avoid talking about sex at home. Some teenagers in Wang’s study even stated explicitly that avoiding such communication was beneficial.

“Sex is a strictly private topic in traditional Chinese culture. Open discussion or expression of sexuality outside of marriage is deemed socially inappropriate in China,” Wang wrote.

“During and after the Cultural Revolution, sex was considered politically wrong due to its association with ‘Western ideology.’ Given such cultural and political heritage, Chinese people are reluctant to talk about sex-related issues in public or interpersonally outside marriage.”

This attitude resembles the mood in Russia today, where anti-Western views have dominated for years, says Levada’s Papiya, who argues that it’s common in Russian society to criticize the West’s openness about discussing sex and acceptance of various sexual orientations. Some even frame the West’s apparent permissiveness as a threat to Russia’s “national interests,” she says.

Sociologists [point out](#), however, that Russian society’s problems with the West are hypocritical, in light of the country’s general views on sex, reproduction, and cohabitation outside marriage, and the high abortion rate, all of which paints a socially liberal picture that resembles much of what Russians supposedly dislike about the West.

Discussing sex is a serious taboo in many Arab countries, but here there are strong religious

grounds for the inhibition, rather than a state ideology. In an article last year about adolescents in Arab countries, Carla Makhoul Obermeyer, an anthropologist for the American University of Beirut, noted the “low level of communication with parents about sexual matters.”

“Young people in the region do not have adequate knowledge about sexual and reproductive health issues generally, or how to protect themselves from important risks. Nor do they have adequate access to reliable sources of information to answer their questions,” Obermeyer wrote.

In 2012, another professor at the American University of Beirut, clinical psychiatrist Brigitte Khoury, reported her difficulties while researching sexuality among Lebanese youths. Khoury was trying to conduct a survey among university students, but administrators refused to permit any questionnaires that asked about sex.

Ultimately, she had to distribute the survey online, through student groups. When she finally managed this, Khoury says the students’ responses were candid and displayed a readiness to discuss sex.

Money Trumps Sex?

In Western countries, such as the U.S. and U.K., personal wealth has become the biggest conversation taboo, according to recent studies.

British citizens would rather talk about politics, religion, or sexual relations than money (salaries, pay rises, loaning money, paying debts — you name it), according to a survey conducted in 2015 by the credit comparison platform Totallymoney.com.

Wells Fargo bank found similar attitudes in the United States in a study conducted in 2014. Forty-four percent of Americans said personal wealth is the most challenging topic to discuss. At the same time, death (38 percent), politics (35 percent), religion (32 percent), and personal health (20 percent) were all commonly described as unpleasant conversation subjects, but money came out on top.

That being said, times might be changing in the United States, and the trend suggests those Yankees might not be so different from the Russians, after all. According to a study conducted in 2015 by the

U.S. Nerdwallet financial service, 31 percent of Americans now said discussing sex is their number-one social taboo.

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