



# Gender Aspects of Social Services for People in Need of Extraneous Medical and Social Care

**Doroshenko M.Iu<sup>a</sup>, Koroleva K.Iu<sup>b</sup>, Lazurenko N.V<sup>c</sup>, Podporinova N.N<sup>d</sup>, Polenova M.E<sup>e</sup>**, FSAEI HE Belgorod State National Research University, Russia, 308015, Belgorod, Pobedy Str., 85,

The objective of the empirical study of the gender aspects of social services was to study the impact of gender representations of employees and clients of social services on the provision of social services. In our study, we relied on the concept of gender, formulated in the framework of the socio-constructivist approach, and applied a methodically mixed research strategy. Based on the materials of the study, which included a formalized revision of documents on 50 cases of social services (50 personal files of clients at the home-care department, 50 acts on establishing the level of social services for clients, 50 individual programs for the provision of social services, 50 diaries of social workers providing home-based services), we studied a focus-group with leaders of social services and social workers, including controlled monitoring of the provision of social services and in-depth interviews with consumers of social services at home. A comparative analysis of the data was carried out in the subgroups of specialist and clients, men and women, and the level of service. The results of the study showed the dominance of the gender-role approach in the practice of social services for the population. According to the results of the study, the hypothesis about the perception and representation in the public mind of the profession of a social worker and the social service industry in general as predominantly female was confirmed. The grounds for such gender occupational segregation are related to objective socio-economic conditions associated with the level of remuneration in the industry and the low prestige of employment in this area and the general trend associated with the displacement of women to less prestigious and less paid positions. The dominant sociocultural norms such as leadership, physical endurance, rigidity seen as masculine qualities, and care, kindness, attention seen as feminine qualities, associated with expectations regarding representatives of a certain gender also have effect. Separation of gender role expectations is present both in relation to clients of social services by the types of services received by men and women, and in

the assessment of the activities of social workers providing social services. These studies indicate that the principle of gender compatibility of a social worker with a client cannot always be applied. This can reduce the level of confidentiality and comfort when receiving social services from clients, for example, sanitary and hygienic ones.

**Key words:** *Gender, Social Services, Home-Based Services, Social Worker, Social Service Client.*

## **Introduction**

Gender theories are an important methodological tool for analysing the relations and processes of modern society. This study shows the possibilities of using the gender category to study the problems of organising home-based care in the framework of the activities of formal social services institutions.

On the one hand, social servicing practices are universal, since human rights to receive social support and assistance regardless of gender are set forth at the level of international and national legislation. On the other hand, a gender approach finds itself starting from the stages of examination of social services. The leveling of manifestations of gender inequality in various institutional forms of social protection is laid at the stage of a projective assessment of the potential impact of newly developed social support practices (services, various types of social assistance, types of benefits in social insurance, etc.) on both their male and female consumers.

The priority of gender-oriented social work is the activation of personal potential and the maximum satisfaction of the client's needs in accordance with his interests, regardless of gender. Self-development, independence and autonomy in decision-making and lifestyle choices as key principles for building relationships between social workers and their clients contribute to gradual changes in the attitude of society towards gender inequality. At the same time, studies by Russian scientists show that traditional gender value-normative representations can have a significant impact on a person's social positions and program the emergence of certain socio-professional, economic, and sociocultural problems (Zdravomyslova & Temkina, 2014).

We examined the gender aspects of social services for people in two main dimensions. The first is due to the fact that the sectorial segregation of employment existing in Russian society is expressed in the ratio of the degree of feminisation of the industry and the level of remuneration that develops in it, namely, the higher the proportion of women working in the



industry is, the lower the level of remuneration is. Social work in Russia is predominantly a “female” sphere of professional activity: 90% of those employed in the industry are women (Tugarov & Petriashkina, 2017). Social work is classified as part of the secondary labor market, characterized by low status roles. The average wage in the industry is 87% of the average wage in the economy. The profession of a social worker is represented in public opinion mainly as a professional activity, which requires not so much special knowledge and skills, but feminine qualities, such as kindness, care, empathy, patience (Tugarov & Petriashkina, 2017). Such an attitude reinforces the low prestige of the profession, justifies the low level of salaries of specialists and, in general, makes work in the industry economically and socially unattractive.

The second dimension is associated with ideas about men and women in the public mind – gender stereotypes that act as socio-cultural barriers that, under certain conditions, reduce the quality of life of social service clients. The main category that receives services in the form of home-based social services are lonely older people. Among the older generation, women predominate, according to the Federal State Statistics Service for 2016: among the population over 70 years old, about 70% are women (Rosstat, 2016). However, it is unfair to consider this community as homogeneous. The existing “age equalisation hypothesis”, according to which gender inequality is reduced in old age, since all people are equally exposed to physical aging, diseases, and other negative age factors, does not allow for taking into account various social and cultural prescriptions for men and women, economic factors, related to gender occupational stratification. After retirement and formal change of professional status, Russian women often have a lower level of material (pension) support (since had less paid jobs) and continue to work, fulfilling the responsibilities of caring for family members and the maintaining the household. While the burden of social obligations and responsibilities of women is reduced only in part, most men, after retirement, moving away from the role of “earner”, being distanced from household activities throughout life, are not included in routine self-service practices.

As we have already noted, the majority of social workers in Russia are women. In the Russian Federation, almost all regulatory documents that govern activities in the field of social services for clients of social protection institutions are neutral in gender aspect. There are no regulatory acts enshrining the male client category, and there is only one social service standard that reveals the specifics of female problems (GOST, 2018), while it doesn't mention older women and women with disabilities as a specific category. Periodically, in the practice of home-based social work, situations arise when a male client in need of nursing care would feel more comfortable in the process of providing sociomedical and sociodomic services if his social worker is a man. We can say that the specifics of gender issues of male clients are practically not taken into account.



The second largest category receiving home services are persons with disabilities. The fact of disability (a formally confirmed limitation of health opportunities, confirming a citizen's right to receive social benefits and preferences) and the gender of an individual affect the status and opportunities of social mobility in society. Starting from the formalisation of the formal status of a person with a disability, differences in gender attitudes are manifested, due to traditional ideas about roles and informal social norms that dominate in this society. Many men of working age, fearing to lose the role of the "breadwinner of the family" in the eyes of their environment, receive disability certificates only when their health does not allow them to continue their professional activities. The situation is slightly different for women with disabilities. In the public mind, there are more flexible attitudes regarding the obligation of a woman to provide herself financially, however, housekeeping is considered as one of the main roles that a woman with a disability cannot always fulfill due to her state of health.

The main objective of the research is to study sociocultural gender issues that arise in the practice of home-based social services.

The following tasks were formulated to achieve this goal:

- To study the attitude of social workers and specialists organising home-based services to gender issues in social services;
- To identify key gender issues that exist in the provision of social services at home;
- To analyse the experience of applying a gender approach by social workers in the provision of services within the framework of home-based social services.

## **Methods**

When developing the research design, we relied on Russian gender studies in a transnational context (Zdravomyslova, Temkina, & Gapova, 2000, 2014) and the paradigm of social constructivism (Zdravomyslova & Temkina, 2007). When describing and analysing gender expectations related to the professional activities of social workers, which lies in the field of social care, we used the works by M. Daly (2002), P. England (2005), B. Ehrenreich and A. Hoschschild (2002), K. Rummery (2012), J. Tronto (2013), and D. Williams (;2012).

The study implemented a methodically mixed approach. Quantitative research methods were presented by a formalised content analysis of texts of internal documents, and regulations for the provision of social services. The study applied qualitative methods. An in-depth interview with receivers of social services revealed the attitude of clients to gender issues in social services. A focus group with specialists and social workers, including monitoring the process of provision of social services and in-depth interviews, made it possible to study the opinion of specialists on gender issues on the one hand and to observe the manifestation of gender stereotypes at the level of service delivery practices on the other (Olesen, 2000).

## The Main Problems Considered in the Study

The theoretical and practical significance of the research is to study the impact of gender aspects in social services for clients of social protection institutions on the quality of services provided. The reliability of the research results is provided by the initial theoretical and methodological positions that allow us to develop recommendations to expand the application of gender aspects in social services to clients in social protection institutions. The results of the study, on the one hand, allow us to analyse the experience of implementing social services for various gender groups of clients in institutions, and on the other hand, reflect the validity of applying a gender approach in the work.

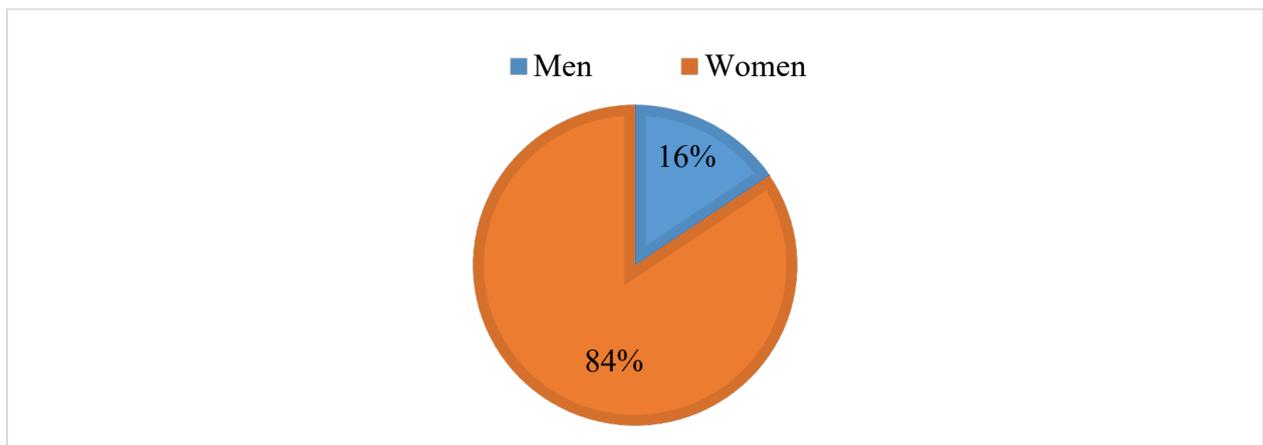
## Results

The study proceeded in four stages. At the first stage, a formalised content analysis of the documents of the municipal integrated center of social services, governing the provision of services to clients at home, was carried out.

The gender composition of clients receiving social services at home confirms the initial hypothesis about the dominance of women among service receivers.

The number of serviced women at the time of the study (2018) was 1,004 (84%), men - 197 (16%) (Figure1).

**Figure 1.** The gender composition of the clients of the integrated center of social services who receive social services at home



Among the 300 employees of the integrated center of social services where the study was conducted, only 13 employees are men (4%) and 287 women (96%). Among the 21 heads of

the integrated center, 20 are women and 1 - man. The data obtained confirm our hypothesis about the predominantly feminine nature of social services as a type of professional activity.

There are more women than men, both among recipients of social services, and among social workers providing home services. Social services are provided mainly by women and, in many ways, focus on female clients.

The study of the specifics of the gender problems of social services through the application of the method of formalised content analysis involved a revision of the documents that record the needs for services, the types of services provided, and the service procedures. A sample for formalised content analysis was 50 personal files of clients at the home-care department, 50 social service determining certificates, 50 individual programs for providing social services, and 50 diaries of social workers providing home-based services. During the formation of a sample of documents for content analysis, the proportions of the general population were observed for such parameters as gender and age of the client, the level of social services at home (depending on the degree of need for care) and territorial division into service areas. Based on the structure and content of the documents studied, the data were compared according to the following indicators: gender of the client and the social worker, age of the client, level of service, receipt of sanitary and hygienic services and domestic services (cleaning the premises, assistance in cooking), the presence and content of client's complaints, the presence and content of social worker's complaints, experience of a social worker. Using the content analysis, the content of documents based on the selected indicators was recorded.

**Table 1:** Results of content analysis

	Gender of a client	Average age of the clients	Level			Sanitary and hygienic services	Welfare service		Client' s complaints	Gender of a social worker	Length of service	Social worker' s complaints
			1	2	3		Home serv	Coo kin g				
F	40 80%	76	4 10%	32 80%	4 10%	4 10%	40 100%	4 10%	8 20%	100%	7 70%	
M	10 20%	65	4 40%	4 40%	2 20%	2 20%	10 100%	2 20%	1 10%	-	3 30%	



As we can see from the data of the analysed documents, the sexual composition of clients is as follows: 10 men (20%) and 40 women (80%). The average age is 76 years, of which the average age of male clients is 65 years old, and female clients - 77 years old. Only 6 clients are at level 3 of social services, which includes daily visits by a social worker and the provision of sanitary and hygienic services and cooking: men - 4, women - 2. All social workers providing home-based services are women (100%). The average working experience is 7 years.

Analysis of complaints about the quality of service showed that for the most part, customers are not inclined to file complaints in writing. Typically, conflicts between clients and social workers are resolved directly face to face, sometimes resorting to the mediation of the head of the department of social services at home. In total, 20% of the total population of female clients complained of their social workers. According to the documents reviewed, male clients made only one complaint. A statistically significant relationship between the experience of a social worker and customer complaints was not identified. It was found that female clients are more likely to complain about social workers. Men are more restrained in making claims.

An analysis of the written complaints of social workers (10 complaints were recorded) showed that 75% of complaints are related to the need to improve the level of social services for clients, switching to daily visits (75% of them are for female clients and 66% for male clients) because the volume of services provided does not allow fully satisfy customer needs. 25% of complaints of social workers are related to manifestations of signs of mental disorders (dementia) and addictions in clients (of which 25% are female clients and 34% - male clients).

As part of the second phase of the study, a focus group was formed, which participants were the heads of the departments of social home services and social workers. The focus group was conducted to obtain information on existing gender issues in social services for clients in the provision of social services - social services at home. The topic guide included the following main blocks of issues for discussion: the impact of the client's gender on social services, the impact of the social worker's gender on social services, the use of gender approaches in the practice of social services.

Opinions of the heads of social services departments and social workers regarding the impact of the gender dimension on social services were divided. On the one hand, respondents noted that the gender of the client is not an important categorical unit in social services, and the legislative acts are gender-neutral. Experts noted the need to take into account personal characteristics in cooperation with their clients.



For example, the head of one of the departments of social services (woman) noted: “In my opinion, there is no difference between clients . . . The service is provided according to the signed agreement, according to the list of services specified therein. The services are the same, no matter whether it is a man or a woman. All our clients are disabled and pensioners, and they need the same thing: help with cleaning the house, delivery of groceries, purchase of medicines, help with paperwork, preparation of rehabilitation means such as wheelchairs, canes, diapers”. The social worker (woman) also stated that her practice “does not depend on the gender of the client, but more on the person him/herself”.

Leveling the client’s gender status dominates the service for clients with disabilities: “You know, when clients are disabled and bedridden, it doesn’t matter whether he is a man or a woman. This is just a disabled person who needs help. I assure you, he/she doesn’t care whoever helps him”.

On the other hand, participants noted that there are differences in the specifics of the provision of services based on the gender of the client. The heads of the social services departments pointed out that “there is a difference between clients – men are more compliant in communication, while women, housewives, do a lot in everyday life, it’s easier with them in this regard”. The social worker (woman) noted: “I have had only 3 old male clients for 11 years of work. Not everyone wants to work with grandfathers. They are very specific. Men, when left alone (without a family), are lost, quickly degrade. Routine life is difficult for them, especially if they cannot adapt”.

Another focus group topic under discussion was the impact of the gender of a social worker on the process of providing social services. Regarding the gender image of the social worker, all participants in the focus group unanimously agreed that social services are a female professional sphere. “Social work is a female affair”. “A woman can better look after those in need. But if you train men, then they also fit”. “Often people without special knowledge are got hired as social workers. Women are more experienced, you know . . . they look after children and parents. Everything is inherent and natural”. “Which one of men will agree to help a strange older person clean the floors? For me, cleaning and washing is a woman’s job”. “Men's work is to lead. And we do not have enough of them in the complex center. After all, he will be able to organise everything and, where necessary, explain, become a leader. I see men as managers, but not as social workers”. At the same time, the need to attract men to home-based services was noted: “Men are needed in social work. A woman will not always be able to carry heavy bags. Only if she’s prepared for physical work, bring 7 kilograms at a time, deliver and report, take a mop and clean the floor, and then run to another client”.



Most heads of departments and social workers identified the impact of gender stereotypes in providing social services: “A female client will be shy about a man. He comes home, and she is in a bathrobe. And then what, will he refuse her service? Will he bring food and hide behind the door? If you train men and attach them only to men, then this will be wonderful. They will find a common language”. Prospects for the application of a gender approach in social services are seen in attracting “male power” to the provision of household repair services.

The application of the focus group method by the participants, who were heads of home social services departments and social workers, identified a number of gender-related problems. The application of the gender approach is carried out on the basis of everyday knowledge about masculinity and femininity. Adhering to gender stereotypes, employees of the integrated center for social services of the population do not accept men at home in the professional sphere due to negative attitudes about the lack of necessary care skills. Respondents believe that social work is “women's” job. In relation to clients with disabilities, the prevailing idea is that they do not have gender identity, and they are attributed to the “middle” gender.

The formalised content analysis data and the focus group were supplemented with information obtained using the method of included controlled monitoring of the process of providing social services at home. The object of observation was the real behavior of social workers and clients in the process of providing social services at home. The information received from applying the observation method supplemented the results obtained in other methods and allowed us to compare the declared and actually applied models of interaction between social workers and male/female clients.

The key distinguishing feature in the service is the set of services provided. Men more often choose help in cooking, while female clients claim to be able to cook their own meals and agree for help only in the case of bad health. A great influence on the choice of services has a factor of the place of residence of the client. Clients living in private houses need help requiring the use of significant physical resources (cleaning the territory, repairing the premises, etc.). Physical strength is needed to provide assistance, which, for the most part, is not available to female social workers. A number of needs cannot be satisfied in full, since they are not included in the list of services.

It was found that there are interesting differences in the subject of communication between clients and social workers, depending on gender. With male clients, social workers discuss socially significant topics (politics, Russian history, the local community), while private female topics (relatives, life experience, illnesses) are discussed with female clients.

The fourth stage of the study was the conduct of an in-depth interview with clients aimed at identifying the gender problems of social services at home from the point of view of the receivers of social services themselves. To conduct an in-depth interview, 30 respondents were selected from among the clients of the comprehensive social services center, who corresponded to the previously selected criteria - gender and age of the client, level of social services at home and territorial division.

During the interview, it was noted that clients, as well as social workers, have a stereotypical idea of masculinity and femininity. The woman for clients is, first of all, the keeper of the hearth, the mother. Female clients note feminine qualities that help in the implementation of care: "A woman should always be humble, do not talk too much and help". A man "must be strong, master". A social service client, an 89-year-old man agrees with them: "A woman must be a woman. Not rude, neat, sweet . . . A man is engaged in supporting a family, and a woman raises children, takes care of a man so that everything is normal". Clients, both men and women, emphasize that the ongoing social transformations have significantly eroded gender-role positions. In many areas, a gender-neutral social environment has now been generated. The traditional gender-role distribution of responsibilities related to home maintenance and family care is a thing of the past. A female client noted in an interview that "earlier, a women had to do everything, like cleaning, raising children and earning money. He (a man) came home, watched the TV and read a newspaper. And the woman managed everything at home and at work; I earned more money. I worked at the facility and received a salary twice, while my husband did not have such an opportunity".

Not all clients consider the occurring changes legitimate and acceptable. "Now it so often happens that a man sits with his children, cleans the floors and cooks. Now everything is equal. But this is unnatural, a woman by nature must take care of everything. But modern women cannot do this".

Representations of the social positions of women and men are reflected in the social expectations of clients and are transferred to representatives of any gender in the process of interaction. This is reflected in the specifics of social services at home and in the image of a social worker. All clients interviewed, regardless of gender, believe that a woman should be a social worker, since stereotypes about a woman as a "keeper of the hearth" and "housewife" are shifted to the types of services rendered and the professional sphere as a whole.

Female clients reason this opinion that it is "easier to talk with a woman. This is probably because I am a woman. But if I were a man, I would like a male social worker. You cannot tell a man all that you can tell a woman. A male doctor (man) comes, and I can't tell him everything I would like, I'm embarrassed at him. He will leave, and I consult with a social worker". Female clients equally categorically spoke out about the potential possibility of

involving male social workers in social services: “I would not let a man (into the house). Will a man help me clean my house!?” (with bafflement). Only if I need to do some men's job, then okay, but in other cases I won't let him come inside”.

Only one of the clients concentrated in the course of the study of women took a gender-oriented position: “A woman is better for me, but there are all kinds of men who can cook and clean. Men should look after men, and women should look after women”.

As for the attitude of male clients to the gender of the social worker, they believe that a social worker should be a woman: “A woman fits better for this job, she is a more economic person. She will buy everything right in the store, more scrupulous in every respect. While a man is a man”. Another opinion of the respondent: “Not a single man is treated like a woman. It is not always convenient to make a woman clean everything, but no one will do better than her. It's in her genes”.

The clients noted that there is a need to review the social services provided. It was noted that “a man in private homes is especially important”, “...to cut down a tree, to carry it - to bring things, to call them as a brigade (group)”.

Based on the results of in-depth interviews with receivers of social services at home, several blocks of gender problems were identified that could affect satisfaction with the quality of social services. The cultural characteristics of gender perception, manifested in gender stereotypes regarding the roles of men and women, are reflected in the emerging image of a social worker. The clients expect that a woman will better fulfill the responsibilities of a social worker in care and consumer services, since she is characterised by the role of the guardian of the hearth. Men are not considered as social workers because of the prevailing opinion that men lack skills in care and maintenance. However, there are professional duties associated with the need to use physical force (for example, repair work) or leadership qualities (running a social service organisation), which are associated with masculine qualities. In this context, clients of social services are ready to perceive men as social workers.

## **Summary**

As a result of the study of the specifics of gender issues in social services (using the example of the municipal integrated centre for social services for the population), key aspects of social services were identified that are gender-sensitive and affect the course of the provision of social services and the perception of their quality. Social work as a professional activity in general and in the field of social services at home is perceived by both clients and specialists as a professional sphere of women. The existing thesis was reflected both in the quantitative



data of the institution's internal reporting documentation and in the materials obtained with the use of qualitative research methods (focus group, controlled observation, in-depth interview). Professional roles are categorised on a sexual basis as “male”, associated with the implementation of actions, with high costs of physical resources, and “female” that require empathy, care and attentiveness.

The problem area is the attitude of specialists towards disabled people who are being served. According to employees, “heavy” and “lying” clients are perceived as “genderless”, that is, they do not have gender identity. It was found that the institution of social services is poorly applied gender-oriented approach. Gender is present at the level of stereotypical perception of masculinity and femininity, but not at the scientifically based methods and techniques of social work. The identified problems make it possible to identify areas that need to be transformed in social services through the application of a gender approach in providing social services.



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### **Information about the Authors**

Marina Y. Doroshenko, master student sociology department, Sankt-Petersburg State University

Ksenia Y. Korolyova, associate professor of social work department, Belgorod State University

Natalia V. Lazurenko, associate professor of social work department, Belgorod State University

Natalia N. Podporinova, associate professor of social work department, Belgorod State University

Marina E. Polenova, associate professor of social work department, Belgorod State University

### **Authors' Contribution**

Doroshenko M.Iu. - abstracting of literature, design of research tools, applied research, analysis and description of data.

Koroleva K.Iu. - development of the theoretical and methodological part of the study, formulation of research hypotheses, development of applied research strategies, preparation of the text of the article.

Lazurenko N.V. - preparation of a research program, tools, preparation of the text of the article.

Podporinova N.N. - processing and description of applied research data, preparation of the text of the article.

Polenova M.E. - setting of goals and objectives of the work, general editing of the article.