

What Women Want

This Valentine's day, we asked some of our female students about relationships and how they understood them, how and if they are gendered, any advice for our audience, etc. We consider this a work in progress and if you have anything to add, just drop us a line! All of the contributors wished to remain anonymous.



Illustration: Jeannie Phan

LISTEN

Rishi and Reva have been in a steady relationship for more than two years now, and they moved in together two months back in Mumbai, a city that both loved and of course, a city that supported their dreams and passions. The day was busy for both of them, Reva being a creative manager in an advertising firm and Rishi assisting in film direction. However, they both planned the evening together, be it travelling back in the local together or catching for just a cup of coffee and then getting back home together. Once home, Reva would usually cook up a small meal for both of them, often accompanied by a Netflix watch. Mornings were rushed, yet Reva would often manage to prepare some quick breakfast and do the laundry weekly.

Just two months of moving in, Reva was already feeling exhausted and overly burdened. One evening she decides to have an open conversation with Rishi. Before she even puts her thoughts together to explain what is bothering her, Rishi starts to cuddle and kiss her, leaving the conversation un-finished. Rishi often thought to himself, "I'm happy; this is the life that I always wanted to live". A week later, another attempt by a frustrated Reva is again rejected by a similar act of intimacy — after all, it was all in the name of love, what is even to be questioned.

At the four-month mark, Reva finally expresses her frustrations to Rishi. Rishi gives her a hug and closes the conversation by calling her his little feminist. From then on, Rishi calls her his little feminist even when they are with their friends- a little joke according to Rishi, a source of laughter. Reva feels humiliated for she is made to feel guilty and bad for taking a stance for herself- as if being a feminist standing up for yourself were a bad thing. "Does he even understand the world I live in?" she often wondered.

What could have Reva and Rishi done better to save their relationship? The answer probably isn't finding out what is right and wrong or who is right and wrong. It is not even finding out what went wrong, rather it is about us being a little less wrong. A little less wrong the next time and the next time and the next time again. And the key to being a little less wrong begins with listening. So listen with curiosity, listen with an open mind, listen to understand and listen to build a shared language of love.

Written by Mrs. Donna Stroupe

Listen without conviction – We all grow up with pre-conceived notions and social role expectations. With changing times, it is imperative to question socialization and structures that no longer serve us.

Listen to the past and listen for clues about the future – The past does not predict the future. However, if some things can be triggers and define the future, both partners need to have open communication around matters that concern the other.

Listen to acknowledge the efforts and respect the other – At the end of the day, the foundation stone for any and every relation is mutual respect. Respect for not just the individual but for their extended self, their past, present and future, and all that they bring with them. If only Rishi could hear Reva out without ridiculing her as a feminist and acknowledged her efforts towards the relationship, maybe the relationship would have taken a different shape.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD PARTNER?

I hope you notice that this list applies to a partner irrespective of their gender. Ideally, what two people in a relationship want from each other should have nothing to do with gender constructs but unfortunately, a lot of it also is gendered because of our socialisation and ideas of intimacy and romance. Hopefully, we break these patterns and form beautiful relationships. Psst, here are a few things to begin with:

- **Honesty:** When you say something, I don't have to second guess what it means. Being honest means that the relationship provides you with the space to be the unfiltered version of yourself. You and I can speak our minds without fearing judgment or insensitivity. P.S. White lies are still lies, but we'll agree to disagree on this one.
- **Ability to give and take constructive feedback:** You listen when I say something's wrong, and you're always willing to work on things. You also give me constructive feedback when I'm an unhealthy partner. We trust the space we have created for ourselves to better us. P.S. I like you because... and I love you despite...

- **Respect:** There are tonnes of mutual respect. We don't overlook each other's feelings, needs, and wants. We respect each other's space and boundaries. We respect each other's choices and preferences. P.S. I like my body hair!
- **Fun:** I find you attractive and intellectually stimulating. We have a lot of fun together, even while doing the most mundane things ever (except the dishes. I don't like it one bit!)
- **Fighting well:** You don't fight dirty or constantly bring up the past. We are kind to each other even during fights.
- **Growing without growing apart:** We receive each other's growth well and grow along.
- **Making me feel secure in the relationship:** You never make me feel like I'm not good enough or further my insecurities (which you know because we have talked at length about our past experiences and patterns). We help each other work on ourselves to be the best version of ourselves. We feel loved and special. P.S. I love you on your bad days as much as I do on the good days.
- **Being my cheerleader:** We all have our share of self-doubt, but you've always got my back even when things get rocky. Let's slay that imposter syndrome together!

MEN, WOMEN, AND RELATIONSHIPS

The traditional role of women in a relationship is caregiving, and that of men is to protect and provide support to women. Thus, gender inequality exists and appeals to both women and men as it promises security and intimacy in a relationship. However, it has hidden implications that ultimately help in sustaining gender inequality. It limits the competence and ambition of women in accomplishments and career aspirations. In marriages, gender inequality is highlighted when the couple must decide who will take care of family issues and who will be responsible for income or whose income and career are a priority. Women are expected to raise children and manage household chores. Gender inequalities are frequently the result of social structures that have institutionalised gender differences. There should be workplace and education interventions to overcome gender inequality in a relationship. It must address the relationship processes that limit women's career opportunities by valuing both career and relationship needs, promoting equity in career support and caregiving within intimate relationships, and providing early education to both men and women to reduce the appeal of relationship roles that limit gender equality.

Our socialisation is such that gender roles are constructed and upheld. This also means that such socialisation makes its way into our intimate relationships as well. We all need to make a conscious effort to break free from these roles and norms and make equal relationships the norm. As women, let us have higher expectations and not romanticise the bare minimum that men bring to relationships. We should know what we want and how to treat ourselves better so others can treat us the way we deserve. It is not easy to unlearn socialisation alone, and I hope we all find partners with whom we can carry on this agenda, so the coming generations have better examples!

Write back to cmgioutreach@iima.ac.in for queries, feedback, and suggestions.