

Gender equality influences how people choose their partners

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Men and women clearly have different strategies for picking sexual partners, but the reason why differences exist is less clear. The classic explanation for these differences has been that men's and women's brains have evolved to make certain choices, but a new study in *Psychological Science*, a publication of the Association for Psychological Science, suggests that evolution is only part of the answer.

To be a 'success' in evolutionary terms, women need to have access to resources for raising offspring, and men need to have access to fertile females. Researchers have argued that women tend to prefer partners who have an ability to invest resources in their children (i.e., wealthy men), and men tend to prefer partners who appear fertile (i.e., young women) because [evolutionary adaptations](#) have programmed these preferences in our brains.

But in the modern world, 'success' is not necessarily tied to offspring, so researchers Marcel Zentner and Klaudia Mitura of the University of York in the UK hypothesized that the influence of evolutionary biases on [mate choice](#) would decline proportionally with nations' gender parity, or the equality between men and women.

"There was accumulating evidence that [gender differences](#) in mental abilities, such as [math performance](#), vanish in gender-equal societies," said Zentner. But he and his fellow researchers wanted to see if they could observe the same trend for selecting sexual partners.

Zentner and Mitura had 3,177 respondents complete an online mate preference survey from 10 countries ranking from a low (Finland) to a high (Turkey) [gender gap](#) in terms of the Global Gender Gap Index (GGI) – a measure that was recently introduced by [World Economic Forum](#) to iron out shortcomings of earlier gender parity measures. The participants were asked in their native language whether certain criteria – such as [financial prospects](#) and being a good cook – were important considerations when choosing a mate.

They found that the gender difference in mate preferences predicted by evolutionary psychology models "is highest in gender-unequal societies, and smallest in the most gender-equal societies," according to Zentner.

These results were confirmed in a second study based on mate preferences reported by 8,953 volunteers from 31 nations. Again, Zentner and Mitura found that there were fewer differences between men and women's preferences in more gender-equal nations compared to less gender-equal nations.

Because increasing gender equality reduces gender differences in mate selection, these studies indicate that the strategies men and women use to choose mates may not be as hardwired as scientists originally thought.

"These findings challenge the idea proposed by some evolutionary psychologists that gender differences in mate-preferences are determined by evolved adaptations that became biologically embedded in the male and female brain," says Zentner. But he also adds evolutionary roots shouldn't be ruled out entirely.

"Indeed, the capacity to change behaviors and attitudes relatively quickly in response to societal changes may itself be driven by an evolutionary program that rewards flexibility over rigidity."

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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