

Is traditional heterosexual romance sexist?

August 2 2023, by Beatrice Alba



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Despite progress towards greater gender equality, many people remain stubbornly attached to [old-fashioned](#) gender roles in romantic relationships between women and men.

Conventions around heterosexual romance dictate that men should [approach women](#) to initiate romantic interactions, ask women out on [dates](#), pay on [dates](#), make marriage [proposals](#), and that women should

take their husband's [surname](#) after marriage.

While some might view these conventions as sexist and anachronistic, others find them captivating and romantic.

They reflect differentiated [gender roles](#) in which men take the lead and women follow. Feminist [critiques](#) of such practices argue that they reinforce male [dominance](#) over women in [intimate relationships](#).

So we set out to find out why women might still be attracted to these conventions in the modern world. We [surveyed](#) 458 [single women](#) in Australia on their preference for these conventions, as well as a range of other attitudes and desires.

The study examined whether these conventions might simply be a benign reflection of women's personal preferences for partners and relationships. But we also considered the possibility that they might be underpinned by sexist attitudes.

What do women want from men?

One possible reason women prefer these romance conventions is simply because they are traditional, and people like traditions. However, many of these conventions only really took hold in the [20th century](#).

Some provide a handy script that we can follow in romantic interactions. They help us to navigate the uncertainty of the situation by removing some of the guess work about who should do what.

Another possibility is that men's enactment of these romance conventions indicates their likelihood of being a committed and invested [partner](#). It may also signal he has resources available to invest in a relationship (and family), which research shows women find [appealing](#)

in a [partner](#).

Women like 'nice' men

We [considered](#) whether women's endorsement of these romance conventions might be explained by their personal preferences for partners and relationships. Specifically, we predicted that the preference for these conventions would be greater among women with a stronger desire to find a committed and invested partner.

We found women's desire for an invested partner was indeed correlated with a greater preference for these conventions. This preference was also stronger among those who favored a long-term committed relationship and disfavored short-term casual sexual relationships.

We also investigated women's attraction to dominant men, since these conventions require men to take the lead and play a more active role in romantic encounters. As predicted, women's attraction to more dominant characteristics in a partner—such as being assertive and powerful—was also correlated with a greater preference for these conventions.

But is it sexist?

[Previous research](#) has found that sexist attitudes and feminist identity are also relevant.

We found women who preferred these romance conventions were less likely to identify as a feminist. They were also higher on [benevolent sexism](#), which is a chivalrous form of sexism that idealizes women, but also views them as less competent and needing men's protection. We even found that they were higher on hostile sexism, which is a more overt form of sexism towards women.

Importantly, we analyzed all these variables together to reveal the strongest predictor of the preference for these romance conventions.

We found women's desire for an invested partner and a long-term [relationship](#) no longer accounted for women's preference for these conventions. However, women who were less inclined to short-term casual sexual relationships were still more likely to prefer these conventions.

The strongest predictor of the preference for these conventions was benevolent sexism. This is somewhat unsurprising, since these conventions look very much like expressions of benevolent sexism in a romantic context.

Most strikingly, overt or hostile sexism still predicted women's preference for these conventions.

In short, sexism stood out beyond women's personal preferences for partners and relationships. This ultimately supports this idea that these conventions may be underpinned by sexist attitudes.

Is romance incompatible with gender equality?

Old-fashioned romance might seem benign and even enchanting. But some might find it problematic if it reinforces inequality between women and men in romantic [relationships](#). We know that even subtle forms of everyday [sexism](#) and [benevolent sexism](#) are harmful to women's well-being and success.

As society moves towards greater [gender](#) equality, we may become increasingly aware of how rigid and restrictive gender roles play out in the context of private relationships.

Some might fear that increasing gender equality means the death of romance. But romance among those with diverse genders and sexualities should reassure us that it doesn't require a universal and pre-determined script.

Perhaps a more critical understanding of ourselves might help us relinquish our attachment to following a simplistic formula set by others.

Embracing [individual differences](#) over inflexible conventions may also allow us the freedom to explore alternatives. We might start to see more egalitarian, or even female-led, [romance](#).

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