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Women are unhappier now than they were 50 years ago, say two economists. Who is to blame?



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There are two ways in which people who crave attention behave: they either say 'no' to everything, or they make startling announcements. Both methods work wonderfully well, especially in the make-believe world of economists.

Given how crowded it has become, and because no one really cares if an economist says no, many of them have taken to the latter *modus operandi*. They say things designed to make heads turn around.

Now, the last 10 articles in this series have sought to show how economics has lost its way. The rest of it will focus on how economists seek to draw attention to themselves. The articles will rely on what passes for research in modern economics. So, *bon appetif*.

Let us start with something that had indeed drawn a lot of attention, at least in the US. Two economists, Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, have written a research paper which says American women are less happy now than they were 50 years ago.

A paradox?

The paper is called ‘The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness’ (<http://www.nber.org/papers/w14976>) and says that “measures of subjective well-being indicate that women’s happiness has declined both absolutely and relative to men.”

Why, you may well ask, is this a paradox? Is it not the natural condition of women to be unhappy about something or the other? Apparently not, because American women had reported greater happiness in the 1970s.

Clearly, something has changed since then to make the poor dears more unhappy now. What’s worse, men — the louts that they are — seem to be happier now than before.

The authors seem appalled that even though “the gender wage gap has partly closed; educational attainment has risen and is now surpassing that of men; women have gained an unprecedented level of control over fertility; technological change in the form of new domestic appliances has freed women from domestic drudgery; and women’s freedoms within both the family and market sphere have expanded” they are less happy now.

This decline in happiness can be seen throughout the industrialised world, it seems. Therein lies a warning for India.

‘Second shift’

As might be expected, the fault has been traced back to the old enemy — men. “Sociologists,” say the authors, “have argued that women’s increased opportunities for market work have led to an increase in the total amount of work that women do” suggesting not only that they work in the office but also do most of the housework.

Let me quote the authors: “Arlie Hochschild’s and Anne Machung’s *The Second Shift* (1989) argued that women’s movement into the paid labour force was not accompanied by a shift away from household production and they were thus now working a ‘second shift’.”

But they also point out that time-use surveys have shown that there have been relatively equal declines in total work hours since 1965 for both men and women. More men are doing housework now than before, poor fellows.

So what’s wrong with the women, then? What are they complaining about? This is where we start getting into muddy waters.

Emotional responsibility

Women, it has been argued on their behalf, have maintained the emotional responsibility for home and family. “Thus even if men are putting in more hours, it is difficult to know just how much of the overall burden of home production has shifted, as measuring the emotional, as well as physical, work of making a home is a much more difficult task”.

This, by the way, is the essence of Gödel’s Theorem which states that in every system of

arguments based on propositions, there is always one proposition which can neither be proved nor disproved. This is also the secret of how many women win arguments with men.

Be that as it may, what explains the declared declines in happiness amongst women in industrialised countries? One answer, say the authors, could be that, given that they have moved up in the economic scale and social status, they simply require more to declare themselves happy. The benchmarks have increased.

Another reason, they say, could be that “women may now feel more comfortable being honest about their true happiness and have thus deflated their previously inflated responses.” But this sounds intellectually shady to me.

Women’s movement

What I liked most, however, was the following statement in the paper. “The changes brought about through the women’s movement may have decreased women’s happiness. The increased opportunity to succeed... may have led to an increased likelihood of believing that one’s life is not measuring up.

Similarly, women may now compare their lives to a broader group, including men, and find their lives more likely to come up short in this assessment. Or women may simply find the complexity and increased pressure in their modern lives to have come at the cost of happiness.”

The grass, as the man said, is always greener on the other side. Women are finally discovering this. Praise be to God.

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