

Sumita Kale: The other imbalance

A study shows happiness has declined more rapidly for women than for men in the US

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Forget about global financial imbalances — the G8, the IMF, China, the US, somebody will figure out something someday. But what are we to do with the imbalance that is building up in our homes? Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers of The Wharton School document 'The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness' in an NBER paper¹ this month. Part of the new field of happiness research, this paper reveals that though by many objective measures, the lives of women in the US have improved over the past 35 years, their subjective well-being has declined both absolutely and relatively to men. This conclusion would make male readers smirk, 'So what's new? Give a woman everything, and she continues to whine' while women would probably sigh and wipe a tear from their eye in empathy. But whatever be the gender of the reader, the paper is bound to raise instant reactions. Stevenson and Wolfers use various datasets to measure subjective well-being by the question: "Taken all together, how would you say things are these days, would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?" They find that while happiness has declined for both men and women in the US, women used to report higher levels of happiness than men. However, over the period tested i.e. 1972-2006, happiness levels have fallen much more for women and this result is pervasive, irrespective of age, marital, work or fertility status. Data from Europe shows happiness has increased (*Vive la différence!*), but more for men than women — hinting at a similar gender gap in happiness on both sides of the Atlantic.

Actually, this paper has been around for a while and when David Leonhardt referred to its draft version in September 2007, his piece topped the 'Most emailed' list of *New York Times* for days. The paper was, and continues to be, rich fodder for blog posts, attracting a torrent of emotions from readers. There was in fact a fiery debate as Mark Liberman at UPenn brought up the issue of generalisation unleashed with statistical testing in his post 'The Happiness Gap and the Rhetoric of Statistics'²: 'Some economists fit a complicated statistical model (called an "ordered probit") to the whole sequence of survey results from 1972 to 2006, and this analysis suggests that women have become a little tiny bit less happy relative to men over that whole time period. But the effect is so small that you can't actually see it in the statistical analysis for any one year... This doesn't invalidate the struggle of people juggling work, family, friends, sex and everything, or the concerns about (un)changing gender roles — but we should be able to talk about those things without projecting them onto marginal social-science analysis showing possible differences between groups and across time that are at best a small fraction of the within-group variation.'

Wolfers and Stevenson's defence through the blog Marginal Revolution, reiterated the statistical significance of their results and tried to explain the 'economic significance' of their paper by providing some comparisons. According to the authors, for instance, using other studies about the relationship between unhappiness and unemployment, the relative decline in the subjective well-being of US women over the past 35 years is roughly comparable to the effects of an 8.5 percentage point rise in unemployment rates (that is, e.g. a rise from 4 per cent unemployment to 12.5 per cent). They did qualify these comparisons as being not entirely satisfactory, and actually sought better ideas on assessing the economic significance of changes in qualitative variables like happiness.

But all this quibbling about the size of the effect detracts from the central issue: Why are women, on an average, reporting less happiness now? The paper sets out many possible reasons. Perhaps women are aggregating satisfaction over an increasingly larger domain set — satisfaction at home was the sole criterion before, now satisfaction at work has been added to the list. Perhaps women are more honest about their answers now. Perhaps women compare their lives to a broader reference set that includes men and find their lives coming up short. Perhaps women need to come to terms with their own expectations. There is no

clear answer. Perhaps, as Oscar Wilde wrote, 'Women are meant to be loved, not to be understood.'

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1 'The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness', NBER Working Paper 14969, May 2009, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w14969>

2 <http://158.130.17.5/~myl/languageblog/archives/004969.html>