

The fairer sex becomes the unhappier sex

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When it comes to happiness, women seem to be losing the battle of the sexes.

A Wharton study released last month shows that women have become less happy relative to men, a turnaround from thirty years ago when women were the more satisfied sex.

Business and Public Policy professor Betsey Stevenson, who, along with professor Justin Wolfers, authored the study, said the results "raise provocative questions about whether women have been made worse off by societal changes."

In particular, the study states that one reason for the gender gap could be women finding "complexity and increased pressure in their modern lives to have come at the cost of happiness."

"The increased opportunity to succeed in many dimensions may have led to an increased likelihood of believing that one's life is not measuring up," the study states.

Sociologist and Women's Studies program co-director Demie Kurz says inflexible workplace standards could cause this increased stress.

Companies "make it very hard for people who are taking responsibility for their family, who are more often women than men, to manage their lives," she said. "The standards for childbearing have gotten much higher. You put those two things together and you get increased stress."

She added that possible policy solutions include more available day-care and paid maternity leave.

But Stevenson says that, while most media sources have focused on the decline in happiness among married women, the study shows this decrease has occurred with most age groups, including women who aren't married or don't have children.

Ilene Rosenstein, director of Counseling and Psychological Services, says she sees this trend in some Penn students.

"Graduate and professional students who are women start to feel the push and pull of family and work life," she said, adding that CAPS offers numerous women's support groups to address how to balance roles.

College sophomore Sarah Dain says the happiness gender gap could also result from differences in the way men and women express themselves.

"I'd say women tend to show their stress more than men do," she said. "I don't think women are unhappier than men but [are] just more open about their feelings."

In the study, Stevenson and Wolfers point to a host of other factors that could account for the trend. For instance, socioeconomic trends like increasing economic risk in households may have had a greater negative impact on women than men.

Other possibilities include changes in the way women evaluate their own happiness.

"Women could have exaggerated their happiness in the 1970s because of social pressures," Stevenson said. "And because of the women's movement, when asked today, they might just be more honest about their situation."

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