

# Stop telling me I'd be happier in the kitchen

Women may still not be exactly full of joy, but we're definitely better off than our mothers



**Ruth Sunderland**  
The Observer, Sunday 27 September 2009

[A larger](#) | [smaller](#)

Women, huh. There's just no pleasing us. Over the past four decades, thanks to the advances of feminism, we are no longer mere chattels: we're running companies, schools and hospitals, even entire countries. But are we happy? Hell, no.

Marcus Buckingham, an American author, has provoked a media storm in the US by drawing attention to data suggesting that while men have become more satisfied with their lives since the early Seventies, women, en masse, have become more miserable. It doesn't matter whether we are smugly married or neurotically single, an earth mother or child-free, a CEO or a housewife. All the hard-won achievements of the women's movement, giving us greater choices in education, employment and politics have done is to make us even more fed up. In 1972, according to the US General Social Survey, the average woman rated her happiness at 2.24 out of 3; that had declined to 2.17 by 2006. Over the same period, men's sense of their own well-being went up by almost exactly the same amount.

Buckingham suggests that the increased choice for women is "inherently stressful" and that we are being "driven to distraction" by the range of options on offer. It's a hot topic: a separate research paper, "The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness", published by Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers of the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, ponders whether women are hacked off because men have gained disproportionately from feminism, since they no longer have the stress of being the sole provider.

I can't speak for the whole of womankind, but what is making me unhappy right now is a bogus set of measurements that can all too easily be manipulated by reactionary thinkers who believe women are only truly fulfilled when we are elbow-deep in dirty nappies.

These statistics are a joke. If someone asked me how happy I was, my answer would never involve a decimal point. The data has a spurious aura of precision, but trying to measure an elusive and subjective emotion on a score from 1 to 3 is mad – and dare I say it? – a bit male.

By comparing a supposed manly gain in happiness with a female loss, the research subliminally suggests that the two sexes are engaged in a battle to win a bigger slice of a commodity in fixed supply – a kind of hedonic land-grab. Yet men don't get to have pleasant lives at the expense of the opposite sex: if the women in their life are happy, they are far more likely to be happy too.

It's easy to hanker after what seemed like a simpler era, hence the popularity of Nigella

Lawson's brand of domesticity and Cath Kidston's vintage floral prints. Lawson and Kidston, though, are powerful and wealthy modern women. In the pre-feminist 1960s, these domestic divas would have found it far harder to flourish. Those days were far from a golden age for women, as the brilliant TV series *Mad Men* reminds us through the troubled character of Betty Draper, trapped in her beautiful suburban home while her husband energetically philanders his way round Manhattan.

In 1972, my mother was at a similar stage of life to mine now, but her experience was dramatically different. She raised a few eyebrows on our little cul-de-sac by having a career of her own as a teacher, but she was typical of her generation in that she put her own needs and ambitions well behind caring for my father, my brother, our grandparents and me. Her own parents considered her to be secondary to her two brothers and she was determined I would never be treated like that; much as she loved us, she still felt shackled and was determined for me to have the freedom and equality she lacked.

Greater opportunity has made women's lives more complex. I sometimes envy the stability my mother had then, living in our home town surrounded by close family, but I know she would give her right arm to have had my opportunities for education, travel and economic independence.

Women today judge ourselves, and are judged by others, across a broader field than before, and that can be stressful. In the past we had to perform as wives, mothers and home-makers, now we are weighed up for our career achievements as well, on top of the perennial pressure to be slim and look fabulous. As one colleague said, it's not that we're unhappy because we have too much choice, but because we've got too much to do.

At root, though, it is nonsensical to claim women were happier in the sexist Seventies, because it is impossible to make objective comparisons between our respective frustrations and satisfactions, and the effect they have on individuals. This generation does, however, have more control and self-determination than our mothers did, and we shouldn't surrender that just because it makes things more complicated. That would be reducing women to the state of infants who don't know what's best for ourselves, incapable of authentic, self-realised happiness and fit only for the bliss of ignorance.

The very idea the women's movement has won a hollow victory is ludicrous for the simple reason that there hasn't yet been anything remotely resembling a feminist triumph. We still bear the lion's share of childcare, housework and looking after elderly relatives, and we still only earn around 80 pence for every male pound, even if we work full time.

As the *Observer* reported this summer, 130 companies in the FTSE 350 still have all male boards and women hold only 34 executive directorships out of a possible total of almost 1,000. So after centuries of women playing a secondary role, we are still in the relatively early stages of transition, and it is far too early to start saying that equality isn't making us happy. We shouldn't start sounding a retreat when the advance has only just begun."

guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2009