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The pursuit of female happiness

Surveys say women – particularly mothers – are becoming less happy. The solution is to give them even more opportunities



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Yesterday was a really bad day. Despite the fact that I have a five-month old and my babysitter cancelled, I had hoped to get in a little work, just a few hours during nap time to think and write – the two things, in addition to my family, that make me feel whole.

But, yesterday, it wasn't happening. Clara took some naps – three of them in fact – but they totaled approximately 12 minutes. So I spent the day pacing the house with her, looking longingly at my computer, making mock smiley faces in mirrors and thinking that the thing about infants is that they are very cute, very roly-poly and also quite boring.

It was not, in other words, technically a happy day – nor a particularly unusual one – for me, and, apparently, many women. According to a variety of recent surveys, including the General Social Survey, which has tracked Americans' moods since the early 1970s, women have become increasingly unhappy over the last three-and-a-half decades, while their male counterparts have become more content.

Interestingly, the surveys reveal that this trend, with rare exception, holds true for all women, whether they are American or European, poor or wealthy, married or single. But most of the press – and perhaps rightly so – has turned this into a discussion about the challenges of balancing work and family, and the gloomy reality behind all of our hard-won "choices". The Huffington Post has a series on it. And even Maureen Dowd adopted an unusually melancholy – if still achingly sarcastic – approach to the subject when she observed:

When women stepped into male dominated realms, they put more demands – and stress – on themselves. If they once judged themselves on looks, kids, hobbies, gardens and dinner parties, now they judge themselves on looks, kids, hobbies, gardens, dinner parties – and grad school, work, office deadlines and meshing a two-career marriage.

Quoting Betsey Stevenson, an assistant professor at Wharton, who co-authored a piece titled "The paradox of declining female happiness", Dowd emphasises that children are the source of much of women's angst. "Across the happiness data, the one thing in life that will make you less happy is having children. It's true whether you're wealthy or poor, if you have kids late or kids early."

I don't think most mothers today will find this detail particularly surprising – at least as far as day-to-day (versus long-term) happiness goes. Raising children is tough. Not

showering or sleeping or going to the bathroom without an audience is tough. And yet, despite this, these surveys on women's unhappiness don't bring me to the edge of despair or convince me that the feminist dream is over, that we can't have it all.

Ironically, on a practical level, I have motherhood to thank for this optimism. It sounds simple, but it's taught me that these things are hard – work, family, life – so you do the best you can. Some days you'll get 30 seconds to yourself, to think, to be. Other days, you'll get nothing. One day an agent will request my manuscript. I'll get most of a Comment is free piece done. Other days, I'm lucky if my kids' socks match. When I remember this, happiness becomes a much more malleable, less anxious question for me.

Understanding this is also what makes me hesitant about reading too much into these surveys, as judging happiness requires a good dose of perspective. Will I be happy in an hour when I retrieve my four-year old from school? Well, that depends a good deal on whether she comes out telling me some funny story involving cheesy biscuits and glue, or, equally likely, makes me the subject of target practice for her ever-expanding vocabulary of swear words. "Oh, Mummy, you piss me out!!!" Motherhood has taught me there are things I can't control – like naps and the whims of four-year olds.

None of this is to say that I'm pleased with these survey results or think women are just complaining. But I also don't think we should assume that women's problems lie in the fact that they have too many choices.

For one, we don't have figures for how happy women were in the 1950s and 60s, when many of those choices didn't exist. Secondly, women almost undoubtedly have higher expectations now, and may become unhappy as they struggle to achieve them. But that doesn't mean the expectations are bad. It doesn't mean we shouldn't get angry when our boss won't negotiate flex-time, or the richest country on earth doesn't give paid maternity leave, or if he leaves his socks on the floor again.

Having a happy home life and work life is challenging, but it's not a pipe dream. As a society, we need more flexibility and generosity – both in our workplaces and in our view toward women. We need to understand that, when it comes to parenting – or in this case, mothering – there are a million ways to do the same thing.

For some women, working part time brings them happiness. Others may want (or need) more hours. Some women want a break while their kids are small. Others go bonkers if they're inside all day, CBeebies blasting. The more opportunities available to women – from maternity leave to national daycare – the better off and happier they will be.

But we also need to give mothers more respect, because if anyone is leading this work-life revolution, it's them. You rarely read about this in the press, where even in sympathetic venues women are often portrayed as shallow and scatterbrained (gardens! Hubbies!). But the truth is that the vast majority of women I know do nothing but juggle work and kids, and they do it really well, despite the odds against them.

My daughter began school less than three weeks ago, and already I know the work-life dilemma of practically every mother on the playground drop-off, pick-up circuit. One has begun insisting her husband do some of these drop-off, pick-up duties. One says she just signed a contract to get Fridays off – "which means," she added, knowingly, "I'll work Saturday nights for nothing!" Another told me that when her boss refused to give her flex-time after the birth of her daughter, she took her case to a tribunal and won.

Instead of constantly telling women what they are doing wrong – Having babies too late! And with pain relief! – it's about time we start highlighting all that they do right. I guarantee that would put a smile on their faces.

But while most women may not always look or be happy, I suspect they wouldn't trade their problems for the world. Indeed, when surveyed, only 39% of women say they would like to go back to the old male-breadwinner model. Despite my own bad days, I know I wouldn't.

As I try to wrap this up, I can hear my kids screaming downstairs. My husband is watching them and letting me know it. I can hear him panting from up here, and when I recently went down to get more coffee, he enthusiastically informed me that he had vacuumed. I was tempted to mock congratulate him – "My hero!" We are much more traditional in our work-life routine than I would like, and it is, no doubt, the source of much anxiety and frustration for both of us.

But we are working on it, so I reign in my sarcastic streak. Deep down, I know we are both exhausted and doing our best. And I also know my mother never heard those words coming from my father.

In the end, I gave him a smile. We've agreed I can work till noon, which means I've got one more hour to think and write. Which means I'm feeling good.