

## Fun is hard work for those still on the chain

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WOMEN, the economists say, are becoming less happy. Less happy than men, and less happy overall. It is hardly news that despite the gains of the feminist movement, women still shoulder the bulk of housework labour. What hasn't been studied though, until now, is what effect this is having on men and women's levels of happiness.

Apparently, women have the blues. And the reasons might make you feel guilty next time you go home to mum for a home-cooked feed. I've always loved a family visit. Unlike my all-male sharehouse, the family home does not smell like a waylaid sock, the internet connection's a cracker, and the food is great. And plentiful.

"Eat some more," mum, whose nightly dinners belie her 50-hour working week, regularly says. I tell her I'll leave some for work tomorrow. "I've already packed you some!"

Bliss. But two new studies have found that the increased pressure on women over the years is dinting their overall level of happiness. One bit of research, by the Princeton University professor Alan Krueger and four other number-crunchers, found that in the last 40 years women have progressively filled more of their day with tasks they consider unpleasant.

Putting a new twist on what is known as a time-use survey - which tracks time spent on daily tasks - Krueger investigated how people felt about out what they were doing: whether they happily cleaned the kitchen, anxiously relaxed with friends, or ambivalently watched television. Which is where, somewhat disturbingly, the family visit enters the fray.

The study suggested women considered having visitors and visit others more tiresome than men did. While men relax and enjoy themselves, women are more often called on to play hostess.

A similar discrepancy showed up when women were asked about visiting their own parents. More than a quarter of women, Krueger showed, considered time spent with parents to be unpleasant or stressful. In contrast, only 7 per cent of men disliked returning to the nest.

Krueger had a hunch as to the reason: for women, time spent with parents often resembled work, because it meant helping to pay bills or plotting family gatherings. "For men, it tends to be sitting on the sofa and watching football with their dad," he told *The New York Times*.

Krueger's findings - that women spend an increasing proportion of their day doing unpleasant tasks - echo the result of another study, also American, which suggests a growing happiness gap is emerging between the sexes. Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, say that on almost all objective measures of progress, women's lives have got better in the last generation.

But on self-reckoning - their subjective assessment of how they are going - women are now less happy than men. A few decades ago the reverse was true, with women tending to outscore men when quizzed on how they felt about their own well-being.

But now women, at least in America, are falling behind. Stevenson and Wolfers, who have reviewed happiness surveys, suggest women, old and young, married and single, and across all levels of education, have grown increasingly dissatisfied.

They throw up a range of possible explanations. (Keeping in mind, of course, that happiness surveys need to be taken with a grain of salt: they are mostly subjective.)

One says the growing complexity of life opens up a new world of dissatisfaction. "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," they say.

Another possibility is men have managed to grab hold of more than their fair share of the benefits of the women's movement. So it is not only women, of course, who enjoy the benefits of sexual liberation.

And for men it helps to have a second income in the family, especially when, as time-use figures show, women continue to perform the bulk of the unpaid housework, on top of going out to work themselves. (Consider the language surrounding housework: women do the washing up, men help with it).

All this is food for thought for men who crawl back to their mothers for a big meal. Next time we should probably pour mum a glass of wine, tell her to put her feet up and cook the meal ourselves.

Which would be fine, except the thought of my cooking depresses her.

*This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2007/10/04/1191091275222.html>*