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Why the long face, ladies?

Conservative New York Times columnist Ross Douthat knows why women are unhappy: Not enough sexual stigma!

Rebecca Traister

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Ah, Ross Douthat, fresh young conservative Times columnist. How you beguile with your total weirdness!

Today comes [Douthat's column](#) about the reported rise in unhappiness amongst liberated modern women. Douthat is writing in reference to a paper by economists Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, called "[The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness](#)," in which they examine why, in Douthat's words, "male happiness has inched up, and female happiness has dropped," even as American women become steadily "wealthier, healthier and better educated than they were 30 years ago," as well as freer to control their own reproduction, leave abusive marriages and sue sexist employers. At the rate they're going, Douthat argues, "men look increasingly like the second sex." Douthat wonders: Why the long face?

Well, as it turns out, the great thing about "The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness" is that it doesn't offer any easy explanation. Which gives Ross Douthat plenty of space to wonder what it could be.

He begins with the confident assertion that part of the problem has to be "the decline of the two-parent family," which he believes is "almost certainly depressing life satisfaction for the women stuck raising kids alone." The financial and emotional stresses of single motherhood are surely a reality for many women raising families on their own. But Douthat doesn't take into account those who are relieved not to be stuck in miserable or abusive marriages, or those who are not so much "stuck raising kids alone" as they are freer than ever before to make reproductive, social, and financial choices that enable them to have families even if they have not entered, or have not wanted to enter, legal heterosexual unions before their childbearing years are over.

But Douthat writes, single motherhood can't be the only reason that ladies are blue, because "the trend toward greater female discontent cuts across lines of class and race," and so while "a working-class Hispanic woman is far more likely to be a single mother than her white and wealthy counterpart...the male-female happiness gap holds in East Hampton and East L.A. alike." Putting aside the bizarre notion that those in East Hampton and East L.A. would necessarily have to be unhappy for *the same reasons* in order for the happiness gap to make any sense, Douthat clearly doesn't conceive of single motherhood as anything other than an affliction of poor and minority populations, nor does it appear to occur to him that perhaps the working-class Hispanic woman from East L.A. might experience unhappiness for reasons not directly tied to her reproductive life. But whatever. Undaunted by these quibbles, the columnist bravely soldiers forward, searching for other explanations.

Could it be that the new opportunities and responsibilities for post-feminist women in the workplace have not been accompanied by significant reductions in the labor they're expected to do at home -- there's that pesky "second shift" again! -- leaving women overextended and exhausted, rather than rich, powerful and exuberant? "It's certainly possible," concedes Douthat -- but nah, that can't be it either, because "as Wolfers and Stevenson point out, recent surveys actually show similar workload patterns for men and women over all." Except for the [recent studies](#) that say that, in fact, men still do less childcare and far less housework than their wives, even when both partners are employed full time outside the home.

Maybe, Douthat goes on to suggest, the reason is "political," in the sense that women prefer soothing, squishy egalitarian societies, and that the "cowboy capitalism of the Reagan era had an anxiety-inducing effect on the American female." (From which she has not recovered, more than two decades later. So delicate, the tender political sensibilities of woman! They take ages to mend!) But wait, nope, that can't be it either. Because in Europe, where everything is "warm [and] nurturing [and] egalitarian" (just ask Nicolas Sarkozy!) just the way the ladies like it, they're *still* unhappy!

Gallingly, there's simply no paint-by-numbers answer to the problem of increased female disenchantment, unless of course you consider that, despite all the strides made by women, we're still having conversations about who does the laundry, whether putting on a short skirt decreases brain cells, whether childcare is a feminine responsibility, whether it's immoral to have sex outside of marriage, and why there are so few female CEOs, Supreme Court Justices, and presidents of the United States. These are conversations which, when extended over a period of decades, are liable to put anyone in a bad mood.

But as Douthat points out, feminists and gender traditionalists alike will "probably find vindication of their premises between the lines of Wolfers and Stevenson's careful prose." The feminist -- that's me! -- "will see evidence of a revolution interrupted, in which rising expectations are bumping against glass ceilings, breeding entirely justified resentments." The traditionalist will see evidence of an unwanted revolution, "in which women have been pressured into lifestyles that run counter to their biological imperatives, and men have been liberated to embrace a piggish irresponsibility."

Whoa. What's that last part? Yes, you see, that leads us to what Ross Douthat has found between the lines of the study. It's that what's really making women unhappy is that there just isn't enough sexual stigmatization going on anymore.

All these single, unwed mothers? The ones from East L.A.? Well, Douthat thinks it's high time we acknowledge that their familial status is at the heart of their discontent. Feminists and traditionalists alike, Douthat writes, should agree that "the steady advance of single motherhood threatens the interests and happiness of women," and while he understands that public-policy options are limited, "some kind of social stigma is a necessity." Ah yes, that should make women happier. But wait, he says, just to be clear: "a new-model stigma shouldn't (and couldn't) look like the old sexism." How's that? Because feminists and cultural conservatives should happily join forces to ostracize "serial baby-daddies and trophy-wife collectors as thoroughly as the 'fallen women' of a more patriarchal age."

Oh, tricky Ross Douthat! He's suggesting that we stigmatize the guys, not the women! Which shines a clear light on exactly how he envisions a feminist mission: Surely feminists will join with their ideological opposites and get on board the sexual censure train if it's going to run over men, right? Wrong.

But not because he's completely misread and misrepresented those who are interested in civil, social, economic, legal, and political equality as easily satisfied man-haters. No, it's because in licentious America these days, we are way too unwilling "to accept sexual stigma, period." We are a bunch of lily-livered libertines, who "simply don't have the stomach for permanently ostracizing the sexually irresponsible -- be they a pregnant starlet, a thrice divorced tycoon, or even a prostitute hiring politician."

That's right! We should *permanently ostracize* Maggie Gyllenhaal (I'm sure he was referring to Jamie Lynn Spears or someone, but I figured I'd go with a less well-worn example), Ron Perelman, and David Vitter. Because a) getting pregnant while unmarried, getting divorced, and paying people for sex are all completely comparable acts and b) these people are responsible for women being more unhappy than they were in the 1970s!

Douthat is so concerned for all the poor miserable women out there who should be rolling around like pigs in shit because of all our fancy new feminist freedoms. The real problem isn't about a terrible economy, or persistent class, gender, sexual and racial prejudices, or a planet that's going to hell in a handbasket. No, it's about how, while our increased tolerance for sexual misconduct (like reproducing, or divorcing, or hiring prostitutes, which again are all equivalent) makes us "a kinder, gentler, more forgiving country than it was 40 years ago...for half the public, it's an unhappier country as well."

W.T.F. Okay, first of all: what does "permanently ostracize" mean? Should these transgressors be put in the stocks? Should they be shipped to Rhode Island? In Douthat's formula, once we get rid of them all, will women instantaneously be happier? Or will it take a couple of decades of strictly enforced bi-partisan Puritanism to turn their frowns upside down?

Also, about all of Douthat's breathless man-bashing: Don't believe it for a second.

Human history will demonstrate that when someone is advocating increased sexual stigmatization, they're not really talking about singling out men, who come and go (so to speak) bearing little physical stain of sexual behavior. It's women, with their breakable hymens and expandable bellies, who tend to wear the scarlet letters that Douthat seems to want to start handing out again.

But aside from all of that: Buy a vowel, dude. This is some of the most ill-thought-out faux-concern I've read in a very long time. In this case, I don't think it matters whether you think that women would be happier if their partners shouldered half the domestic burden, or whether you believe they'd be more content if the damn feminists left them alone and let them stay home and raise their kids already. Either way, pushing for further censure of sexual activity would only re-entangle women in bindings from which they have [worked for decades \(centuries!\)](#) to free themselves. Douthat aims in his column for defensive middle ground but falls right in line with patriarchal traditionalists who yearn for the good old days in which what happens to a woman's body -- be it sex, babies, marriage, abortion, and birth control -- becomes the purview of society, not simply of the woman herself.

We already live in a country in which the [unhappiest headlines](#) of the day involve legislating sexuality and restricting the rights of Americans based on what they do in bed. The mere suggestion that enforced social censure of sexual behavior would in any way be a good thing for women (or the men at whom Douthat feints) is just wrong.

– Rebecca Traister

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