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Women less happy after 40 years of feminism

Despite wealth, health and opportunity, men still more content says study by US National Bureau of Economic Research



Richard Woods

On the long and winding road to having it all, Helen Parker is making good progress. At 27 she's forging a career as an executive with a transport company in London, she has a steady boyfriend, and together they are buying a flat. One day the prospect of starting a family will beckon.

By many standards, she's thriving. So is she happy?

"Um, I'm reasonably happy," she said. "And I'm optimistic about the future. But there will always be sacrifices.

"There's plenty more opportunities for women than there used to be — but then again, that means you are always questioning whether the moves you have made are correct, or whether you should have done something else."

Like many women, her sense of wellbeing and life satisfaction do not match up with advances in social circumstances and material comforts. After 40 years of fighting for equality, it seems that women are no happier. In fact, women in many countries have been growing steadily unhappier compared with men, according to a study published this month by the National Bureau of Economic Research in the United States.

In *The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness*, Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers of the University of Pennsylvania, begin by noting the gains.

"By many measures the progress of women over recent decades has been extraordinary: the gender wage gap has partly closed; educational attainment has risen and is now surpassing that of men; women have gained an unprecedented level of control over fertility; (and) technological change in the form of new domestic appliances has freed women from domestic drudgery," they wrote.

Yet Stevenson and Wolfers have found that in America women's happiness, far from rising, has fallen "both absolutely and relatively to that of men". Where women in the 1970s reported themselves to be significantly happier than men, now for the first time they are reporting levels of happiness lower than men.

In Europe, people's sense of happiness has risen slightly, but less so for women than men. In 12 European countries, including Britain, the happiness of women has fallen relative to that of men.

The authors readily admit that measuring happiness is necessarily a subjective task, but the overall trend from the data, compiled from social surveys conducted over many years, is clear and compelling.

The work builds on earlier research by Andrew Oswald, professor of economics at Warwick University, who has a particular interest in the study of happiness. He said: "What Betsey and Justin have done, which is a valuable addition,

is to show that the trend is found rather widely. For most of the post-war era, happiness surveys showed women noticeably happier than men. That difference has now eroded to zero.”

The big question is: why?

When measures of women’s happiness started to dip, some sociologists reached for a simple solution known as the “second shift”. Women’s opportunities in paid employment had increased, but their domestic load had not correspondingly reduced. The belief was that they were going out to work then doing a “second shift” at home — no wonder they weren’t ecstatic.

Sorry, that won’t wash, say Stevenson and Wolfers. Surveys of how individuals spend their time show that for both men and women total work hours (combining paid or domestic) have declined since 1965.

Yes, women’s hours of “market work” have increased, but that has been offset by “large declines in their non-market work”. At the same time “men are now working fewer hours in the market and more hours in home production”.

On a purely statistical basis, women can’t argue their burden has got worse or is now drastically unequal.

However, more subtle influences should be considered, argues Dame Joan Bakewell, the broadcaster, because women’s emotional responses to the change in circumstances are different from those of men.

“Women do stub their toes on the work-life balance much more than men,” she said. “Even if they have solved it (in practical terms), they worry about it.

“So they are probably going to say, ‘Well, I’m not as happy as I could be because I’m carrying this burden of worry’.”

Others suggest that the pay gap between men and women, even if it has narrowed, is still a grievance.

Karen Pine, professor of developmental psychology at Hertfordshire University and author of *Sheconomics*, said: “When I have talked to women about their emotional relationship with money, for many there was still a feeling that they didn’t deserve more.

“Women have been socialised to be people-pleasers. They don’t want to appear greedy or grabbing. When they have to adopt an assertive attitude to money — asking for what they are worth — many of them experience a conflict.”

Studies do show that money is an important factor in happiness: the well-off are happier than the very poor. However, that effect tails off once basic needs are met. The phenomenon is reflected in a recent study by Pine of 700 women and their attitudes to shopping and spending money.

“Years ago women didn’t have independent incomes, and now many of them are financially independent,” she said. “What I found was that 79% — an alarming statistic — told me they would go on a spending spree in order to cheer themselves up.

“Many women are using shopping and spending as a way of regulating emotions.”

Spending, however, doesn’t buy happiness. “Many of them described a buzz at the time, but it was short-lived,” said Pine. “Then they experienced buyer’s remorse and came down to earth with a bump.”

Stevenson and Wolfers also point out that over the past two decades many men, as well as women, have experienced financial concerns. “The real wages (after inflation) of many men fell during much of this period,” they said. Yet it is women whose happiness has notably changed.

If money is not the key, what about families? Divorce rates and cohabitation have soared over the time in which women’s happiness has fallen. However, if they are important factors, say researchers, more unhappiness should be found among single mothers and the separated.

Stevenson and Wolfers concluded the relative decline in women’s happiness “is irrespective of the age, marital, labour market or fertility status of the group analysed”.

There is, of course, the possibility that women are simply being more direct about their happiness than they used to be. As the authors note: “Women may now feel more comfortable being honest about their true happiness and have thus deflated their previously inflated responses.”

However, the international scale of the trend seems to militate against this.

Though nobody has isolated a convincing reason for the decline in women's happiness, there is a consensus of sorts. As Oswald put it: "The lead theory is that women's lives have become more complicated in many dimensions, unlike men who have to balance a smaller number of balls.

"It is probably still true that men do fewer things well."

Pine agreed: "One can always point to increasing pressures on women. We are now trying to have careers and families and look good for longer. It may be that in trying to have it all we are feeling that we may have set ourselves an impossible goal."

Complexity is stressful — and women's supposed skills at multi-tasking are no remedy. However, critics of feminism take a more sceptical view. Complexity is not the problem, they say: it's more to do with women discovering that "equality" with male life is not all it was cracked up to be.

To the writer Neil Lyndon, author of *No More Sex War*, it is a vindication of his view that feminists have long been blind to the stresses of male life. "(Feminists) are so determined to insist that women are in a position of inequality and disadvantage, they cannot see that to repair the disadvantages of women you also have to address the inequalities of men," he said.

"Men who are in work and have young children want to spend more time with their families. Feminists cannot see that. The ideology itself requires you to say that women are in a position of disadvantage, that it's a society run by men for the benefit of men, and that there can't be disadvantages for men."

Women have got themselves into an impossible position, Lyndon suggests, and it won't be remedied until there is proper equality and until no parent — man or woman — is expected, as many men are, "to go to work at 7am and get back at 9pm".

Amid all this hypothesising and argument, what should a pragmatist do? Siobhan Freegard, founder of the website Netmums, discovered her own measure of how women's happiness has declined. A survey of her site users indicated that levels of the "baby blues" experienced by new mothers have risen sharply since 30 years ago. So she set about asking experts to formulate a programme to help.

"In our research one key problem that emerged was that we all move around a lot now," said Freegard. "About 60% of women no longer live near their extended family and the same proportion of women haven't replaced that family support with a new social network. The whole breakdown of community is a factor.

"So we set people tasks. Be part of networks. Join groups. Speak to an old lady. Talk to your shopkeeper. Phone someone you haven't had a good chat with for ages and so on."

The happiness of participants was tested before and after the programme — and at the end they were on average 16% happier.

Might such ordinary, everyday connections be more important to happiness than impossible dreams to have it all? Freegard suspects that might be the case.

"We pushed so hard for equal rights, for having the right to work, for having equal status, we pushed hard to have choice," she said. "But what we hear back from many mums is: I have no choice, I have to work, I don't love my career, my childminder is taking half my salary and I'd rather bring up my children myself but I can't afford to.

"I'm not saying women shouldn't work. If you enjoy your job and it's a fulfilling career, that is a positive choice. But if it's not . . . it's almost in some ways that we got it all, then found that actually it wasn't quite what we wanted."

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