

Life

If you're happy and you know it. . . . maybe you're a Canadian woman. But American women are less happy than they used to be, according to a new study

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Talk about a hot-button issue: Despite women's social and economic gains over the last 35 years, more American women report being less happy. In fact, a new gender gap has emerged: men are now happier than women.

That's according to a study, "The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness," by two University of Pennsylvania economists to be published in the American Economic Journal in August.

But the word's out, igniting gender battles online as both sides point fingers. "Typical complaining women," and "raving, loony feminists," snipe some males. "We have too much to do," and "sexist jerks," females retort.

Happiness, it turns out, is far more nuanced than that and varies by nationality. A Canadian expert says women here not only still top men in life satisfaction, but also score higher on the happiness scale - which includes issues of social security - than their sisters to the south. Who knew?

It's too early to tell if the American findings are a harbinger of a new gender gap here, of women's waning well-being.

"Is it indicative of social trends that will catch on and spread, or is it just a feature of U.S. life?" economist John Helliwell of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research asks rhetorically. One potential sign: Canadian teenage girls are reporting less life satisfaction than the boys.

In a totally unscientific study, the Star randomly asked a dozen women in downtown Toronto about happiness. Two claimed to be very happy and nine, fairly so. One fudged: very, in her personal life; fairly, at work.

None seemed overly surprised by the U.S. study, that women are unhappier now than in the 1970s. "There's no 'me time,'" says a 38-year-old bank analyst with two children.

"Maybe women voice their feelings now. They were unhappy before but didn't say it," suggests a 45-year-old administrative assistant.

Betsey Stevenson, co-author of the "Paradox" study, has no easy answers. This pursuit of happiness business is serious stuff. Economists use such life satisfaction findings to help evaluate public policies, explains the assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School.

She and co-author Justin Wolfers analyzed three different U.S. surveys going back to the 1970s. In all three, women's delight in life diminished more than men's. That held true for women of all ages, education levels, married or single, working or not, mothers or childless.

The two economists looked further for clues. Gauges of marital happiness showed men and women declining equally. "That's just sad," comments Stevenson.

They did find that women today are less satisfied with their household's finances than they used to be and less satisfied than men are. It could be expectations, suggests Stevenson, or women's increased intolerance for discrimination in pay.

They looked at data from 12 European countries. Both men and women are happier than they used to be, but the increases are greater for men.

Canada wasn't included because such longitudinal data wasn't available. "We're starting now," explains Shelley Phipps, economics professor at Dalhousie University in Halifax.

While women here outshine men in happiness, something interesting happens with mothers and fathers. Moms are more pleased with life than dads - until they work too much, explains Phipps.

Once a family's combined paid work exceeds 80 hours a week, both parents get grumpier, but the woman's satisfaction sinks more steeply, making her the less happy one.

On both sides of the border, teenage girls look glummer than the boys. For the 12- to 15-year-olds in Canada, says Phipps, the girls are dragged down by dissatisfaction with how they look. But for that age group, both sexes, the most important correlation to happiness? How well their parents get along in their marriage, says Phipps, a Canadian Institute of Advanced Research fellow.

For the 16- and 17-year-olds, girls like school more and harbour higher educational aspirations, but still report less life satisfaction than boys.

In the U.S., Stevenson found that 17-year-old girls carry the world's weight, worried about doing well, contributing to society.

And they're not having enough fun. That was the deepest decline for girls. Teenage boys were enjoying themselves as much as ever.

Yet despite the dissatisfactions, women in the U.S. surveys are not nostalgic about the past. Overwhelmingly, they said they'd rather be a woman today than 25 or 50 years ago. They said they now have more opportunities to be happy.

A comparison to the 1970s is a bit of the apples and oranges comparison. Satisfaction for women is now spread across more areas. The world is different, more competitive with increased anxieties.

"The changes in women's lives are complicated," concludes Stevenson. "They've changed how they think about life, how they experience life."

So how do you obtain happiness in this more complicated life?

"The headaches and heartaches are mostly behind me now," says a 56-year-old account manager and grandmother, one of only two women calling themselves "very happy" in the Star's unscientific survey.

"In my opinion, people have unrealistic expectations about life. The media places the bar so high - what you have to have, have to do."

"Happy?" laughs the other, a 49-year-old single administrator. "I'm fantastically happy!"

Um, any chemical help with that?

"No drugs or alcohol involved," she says.

"I've come to believe you make a choice to be happy."

1252653-867465.jpg | This woman looks happy reclining on her 1970s couch. But is she happier than women today? | ;shutterstock photo illustration

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