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Why does happiness elude modern women?

By: [Meghan Cox Gurdon](#)

Examiner Columnist | 5/27/09 5:56 PM

Over the last four decades, American women have got almost everything the feminist movement promised. Lucky us! Are we happy now?

No, we are not. All across the industrialized world, wherever egalitarian feminism has sprinkled its fairy dust, women report that they are considerably less happy and satisfied with life than were their benighted, patriarchy-oppressed, apron-wearing sisters of yore.

“The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness,” a new study conducted by Wharton academics Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, finds that the happiness of Western women has been steadily declining over the exact period during which egalitarian feminism has supposedly been delivering the goods.

Given the shifts “of rights and bargaining power from men to women in the past 35 years, holding all else equal, we might expect to see a concurrent shift in happiness towards women and away from men,” the authors write.

However, they have found, “measures of women’s subjective well-being have fallen both absolutely and relatively to that of men.”

How can this be? After all, didn’t feminism achieve what it wanted? Women are today not just free to pursue education, but now actually outnumber men on university campuses.

Women are not simply going out to work, but are in a position to exude wisdom and empathy from the highest levels of government and commerce.

Women are not only able to control their fertility, as radical feminists demanded, but today girls too young to vote are considered old enough to prescribe themselves the morning-after pill.

And it turns out that all this success – or “success,” depending on your degree of irony – has not made women happier.

Nor, of course, has it satisfied the ever-complaining feminist-industrial complex so brilliantly mocked by critic

Camille Paglia as “a jumble of vulgarians, bunglers, whiners, French faddicts, apparatchiks, dough-faced party-liners, pie-in-the-sky utopians and bullying sanctimonious sermonizers.”

The study’s authors are cautious about drawing too-hasty conclusions from what they’ve discovered. Coincidence does not automatically mean causation. It’s also true that happiness is in some ways a mystical quality. Inner contentment derives not just from how cheerful we may feel but also from our position relative to the opinions and successes of others.

Yet the findings are striking. Before egalitarian feminism came along and substantially rewrote everyone’s scripts – in courtship, job expectations, domestic satisfaction, purpose in life -- women reported greater contentment than men.

Today, those positions are reversing. “A new gender gap is emerging,” conclude Stevenson and Wolfers, “one with higher subjective well-being for men.”

(The authors note the perverse effects of the sexual revolution sought by feminists: Men “may have been able to disproportionately benefit” from the “increased opportunities” yielded by the spreading social acceptance of children born out of wedlock, the use of birth control, abortion, and divorce.)

To conservative critics of feminism, and indeed to dissident feminists like Paglia, none of this will be remotely surprising.

The anecdotal experience of millions, along with the analysis by women such as Christina Hoff Sommers, Mary Eberstadt, Danielle Crittenden, Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, and Kay Hymowitz, all confirm what the Wharton academics discovered: Far from enhancing the lives of modern women, in many respects the feminist movement has diminished women’s happiness and satisfaction.

“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,” Stevenson and Wolfers write.

“Similarly, women may now compare their lives to a broader group, including men, and find their lives more likely to come up short in this assessment. Or women may simply find the complexity and increased pressure in their modern lives to have come at the cost of happiness.”

Examiner columnist Meghan Cox Gurdon is a former foreign correspondent and a regular contributor to the books pages of The Wall Street Journal. Her Examiner column appears on Thursdays.

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