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Freedom is not always fun

By: [Marta Mossburg](#)

Examiner Columnist | 5/29/09 6:18 AM

There is no paradox in “The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness.”

The fascinating new paper by economists Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers of the University of Pennsylvania makes it out to be, though. It explores why women’s overall sense of well-being has declined over the past 35 years in both absolute terms and relative to men.

The main issue is why women – across races, continents and income brackets – should feel blue when so many educational and career opportunities opened to them during that time period and when birth control freed them from their uteruses and technology liberated them from much household drudgery.

Feminists, or at least the kind who marched in the 1960s or wish they had, will argue that glass ceilings still halt women’s progress in board rooms, factories and academic centers. The paucity of women in top positions following years of overachievement in universities and graduate schools compared to men makes their argument ring at least partially true.

Traditionalists will say women were never cut out to compete for cutthroat positions with matching salaries and are happier in the home. They are right too, to a certain extent. Women who work in the home show higher levels of life satisfaction than their peers in the marketplace. But even they show declining rates of happiness over the same time period.

But the real answer is not political. It’s personal. Freedom is hard, no matter a person’s philosophical bent.

Too many choices or opportunities can paralyze rather than inspire. Men are used to this. For women, opportunity is still a relatively new phenomenon, and often a confusing one.

The authors cite research showing birth control gave men more power to pressure women to have sex outside of marriage. In other words, when having sex meant a real likelihood of getting pregnant, the choice to say no was simpler and the logic for it unassailable. Now women can’t use – or hide behind – that explanation to say no, and they are less happy.

Fear of freedom is not a female phenomenon, though. An abundance of choice wreaks havoc on everyone,

even as society celebrates it. How many people have ever felt overwhelmed in the shampoo aisle by the myriad choices for straight, curly, limp, permed, frizzy, color treated, and highlighted hair?

And how many have felt oppressed by the hundreds of television channels cable or satellite offers? Wouldn't it have been easier to turn off the television and pick up a book or talk with family when there were only three stations with nothing on instead of 57, as the Bruce Springsteen song goes?

Examples from life and literature abound of people craving security over freedom. As Fyodor Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor said in "The Brothers Karamazov": "There is nothing more seductive for man than the freedom of his conscience, but there is nothing more tormenting either." The Grand Inquisitor envisions a world where everyone is happy because they subject themselves to leaders who sanction their good and bad behavior, forgive them and take care of their material needs.

Dictators throughout the centuries hewed to the Inquisitor's logic. So have politicians of all stripes, from Juan and Eva Peron in Argentina who handed out home appliances to supporters to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who promised to take care of people in their old age through Social Security.

Most recently, President Barack Obama has promised an overarching health care regime for all, and his administration basically runs insurer American International Group Inc. and General Motors Corp. on Americans' behalf.

For all of our talk about loving freedom, Americans and everyone else love being taken care of as much as their liberty.

So women's declining happiness in the face of greatly expanded freedoms should come as no surprise. But neither should a reversal of the trend once they have time to get used to it. The study noted that, "as women's expectations move into alignment with their experiences this decline in happiness may reverse."

It also found that women were getting less happy at a slowing rate over time. If that is the case, then women are perhaps getting more comfortable navigating the myriad opportunities before them and getting better at picking which paths best suit them, regaining their sense of well-being both absolutely and relative to men in the process.

That outcome would defy both liberal and conservative conclusions, since each ideology favors a particular role for women. But isn't it like human nature to defy philosophy? And isn't life so much richer for its unpredictability?

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