

COMMENTARY

The third woman ; Glass ceilings are not glass slippers

Suzanne Fields, SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

816 words

18 June 2009

The Washington Times

WATI

A21

English

© 2009 Washington Times Library. Provided by ProQuest Information and Learning. All rights reserved.

You don't have to be from Venus or Mars to notice that Judge Sonia Sotomayor was appreciated more for her Hispanic roots than for female gifts. That's how President Obama introduced her. Firsts are firsts, after all, and Sandra Day O'Connor was followed by Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and that was that for a woman expecting recognition as a pioneer on the Supreme Court.

No one any longer regards it as worth remarking when a woman becomes a doctor, lawyer, editor, astronaut or chief executive officer. Women have shattered a lot of glass ceilings. And when nobody notices the broken glass, that's a sign of progress. If women haven't gained equality (or superiority) in numbers sufficient to please feminist advocates, few argue that women can't compete with men on level playing fields (with certain exceptions, such as the NFL and NBA). All they have to do is show up.

Even the double standard has been turned upside down. Judge Sotomayor probably will have to answer questions at her confirmation hearings next month about her membership in the Belizean Grove, an all-female club of generals, ambassadors and Wall Street executives that describes itself as "a constellation of influential women." Earlier male judicial nominees were excoriated roundly by certain Democratic senators for membership in all-male social clubs, even rustic fishing clubs. Democratic silence about Belizean Grove so far is deafening.

Choice is the operative word for what most women do these days, and many women still choose to stay home with young children, work part-time or move at a more deliberate pace than men. The househusband remains mostly a feminist fantasy. Most househusbands actually are men who aren't looking for a job.

Women have higher high school and college graduation rates, they're healthier, and they live longer than men. They still carry the babies - nature hasn't changed that - but men are helping out at home in ways that would shock their grandfathers, who never changed a diaper or scrambled an egg. Many get husbandly help with the housework even from men working longer hours.

Despite these gains, women more often express unhappiness with their lives, measured across lines of race, income, education, age and marital status, according to an extensive survey reported by the National Bureau of Economic Research, a nonprofit organization in Cambridge, Mass. Researchers were stumped and constantly refined their questions.

"Relative declines in female happiness have eroded a gender gap in happiness in which women in the 1970s typically reported higher subjective well-being than did men," say survey authors **Betsey Stevenson** and Justin Wolfers. "These declines have continued, and a new gender gap is emerging - one with higher subjective well-being for men."

Numbers never tell the whole story, and it's easy to see how traditionalists might say the pressures of feminism increased the stress in their lives. Feminists, on the other hand, could blame a halted revolution, a revolution that didn't change men to their prescription. Both groups will look for ways to validate their opinions, but so much attention is given to women who have become stars in the public square that women get scant cultural reinforcement for quietly doing their thing, their way.

The woman's honored place at the hearth no longer gets much respect. The archetypal all-knowing, all-giving Jewish-Italian-Greek mother has become a source of jeers, not joy, a stereotype to be mocked, not imitated. The career woman who is a small cog in a big office, hospital or even corporation gets respect for her job skills but not always for her womanly qualities. Chivalry is mortally wounded. Men with good manners are more likely to be gay (or thought to be) than eligible heterosexual suitors. The sexual revolution gives women the freedom to say yes, but not to say no. (Ask any co-ed.)

But another revolution may be stirring. The current fashion craze of little girls is for "princess dresses." Little girls yearning to wear a pink sleeping beauty, lavender Rapunzel or a pale-blue Cinderella ensemble wouldn't dream of suiting up in pants like their mothers. They're dreaming of a glass slipper, not the glass ceiling, weaving the magic of pint-sized femininity. Barbie's career clothes are stuff only for a yard sale.

In the upcoming Disney cartoon "The Princess and the Frog," the fairy tale is told awry. Tiana, the princess who kisses a frog, becomes the frog. No doubt it will all work out in the end, but the prospect of serving time as a croaking amphibian can't be a good omen for living happily ever after.

Miserable as Tiana may be, she's in touch with the times.

Suzanne Fields is an author and columnist.

Document WATI000020090618e56i0000z