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Why women can't get no satisfaction

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Forget the myth of the modern bear-with-a-sore-head caveman. Today it's the women who are grumpy. Has feminism failed us? Lynne Barrett-Lee examines the evidence AS WITH buses and all things that fall under the banner of "important new findings", you wait an age for one to come along and then you get three.

You do if you live in the US, at any rate. Writing in the New York Times recently, the columnist and journalist David Leonhardt noted that something unprecedented had happened in the increasingly big bucks world of happiness research. Since we're all so dead keen on finding happiness these days (as opposed to nine or 10 centuries ago when we were just dead keen on not being, well, dead), the news - that, for the first time since the 1960s, men have reported being happier than women - has sparked frenzied debate on both sides of the pond. How, it's all saying, can this possibly be? Isn't it the other way around?

The findings come from two separate studies. The first has its origins at Princeton University, where economist Alan Krueger and a team of psychologists collected data on how men and women reported they felt when doing day to day activities such as shopping or spending time with friends. Their results showed that overall men were the happier sex, reporting greater happiness than women of all ages and social groupings across a wide range of activities. The other - which is the work of economists Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers at the University of Pennsylvania - looked at more traditional happiness data amassed over the past four decades (that is, people's reported satisfaction with their overall lives) and observed a similar turnabout; whereas in the 1970s women were happier than men, today the reverse is apparent.

Which state of affairs might seem counter intuitive. Bombarded, as we women have been over the years, by endless reportage of the sorry plight of our increasingly emasculated men, it seemed fairly safe to assume that male dissatisfaction was, even if sad, at least credible. Men, we were told, had lost their status, their rag and, by extension, their way; with their traditional roles (protector, provider, top dog) no longer needed on board, and with women ever more encroaching on traditional male territory, they were flailing and uncertain and felt largely redundant. Little more than walking sperm banks, in a growing minority of cases.

But it would seem that our menfolk are, in fact, bearing up rather well. Instead of bleating about their lot in an increasingly girly world, they have, it would appear, been quietly adjusting. While women have been taking on ever more responsibilities, data reveals that men have actually been cutting back on work hours, making more time for leisure and capitalising on women's determination to have it all by altering their work-life balance rather nicely. No wonder they all smile as they flip through FHM.

This change has also brought about another downer for women. New York is not only the home of the New York Times, of course, but also the TV programme *Sex And The City*, which features a character called Miranda, played by Cynthia Nixon, right. A go-getting lawyer, with a wastrel of a boyfriend, she has now lent her name to a new social dynamic. The stylishly named Miranda Complex sees powerful, economically independent women in New York finding it difficult to bag themselves suitable men, and having to play down any mention of their money and power lest they scare all the good guys away. No wonder they're all feeling so grumpy.

Of course, the more cynical among us might be tempted to suggest that anyone would be grumpy if they had to spend all their time stomping about the place in stilettos and scratchy skirt suits but, as any woman who has ever found herself repeatedly passed over for a girl with childbearing hips and a Tupperware container full of muffins under her arm will confirm, money and status might buy you freedom and independence but to many men they represent the worst kind of turn off - a woman who doesn't much appear to need them. And, with even the most metrosexual of men still being biologically male, it's easy to see why this is. They want to breed with women who look like they'd be happy to do the school run, not squabble over windows in diaries.

We shouldn't, perhaps, be surprised by this. Even less so by what seems to be another widely held truth; that we've bought all of this on ourselves. When John Cleese, in the film *Life of Brian*, posed the question, "what have the Romans done for us?", he was quickly disabused of his take on things - nothing - by a long list of benefits their regime had bought. It could be argued that some feel the same about feminism; one post on a blog in response to the NY Times article reads "feminists made their bed. Now they have to lie on it, alone, with their cats." Ouch.

You might be surprised to know that this was not written by a misogynistic male, but a female called Jill with sound feminist credentials, who blogs entertainingly at feministe.com. Which, apart from the meow factor, lends it a little weight. If the research is to be believed, all the advances the bra burning generation have bought us - equal rights, equal pay, independence and choice - have actually, emotionally, left us worse off.

The reasons for this are not clear, though many theories are up for grabs. One of the main points in the research of Betsey Stevenson was made not by her but by a young graduate student who she found herself chatting to over drinks. The student's own mother's goals in life had been so much simpler. "To have a beautiful garden, a well kept house and well adjusted children who did well in school." All things she reported "sort of wanting" as well. But crucially, she also wanted to "have a great career and have a broader impact on the world".

This sense of expectation in modern women is echoed by Oxford language professor Deborah Cameron, whose new book *The Myth Of Mars And Venus* has, coincidentally, just been published too. While it concerns itself more with debunking the idea that there's anything that's significantly different in the way males and females interact with the world, she also sees the perceived difference between the sexes as an inevitable result of us trying to rationalise and demarcate our ever changing roles. That John Gray's *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* sold more than 10 million copies proves that we're all anxious to find ways of dealing with the constant conflicts male/female relationships involve. Professor Cameron sees this as a modern phenomenon. She cites her own parents, married in the mid 1950s, and how they never argued about the division of chores. "They were never," she writes, "in conflict about whose job came first or whose life had to be fitted around domestic commitments. Because these things were settled in advance by the basic fact of gender difference." In short, men ruled the roost; women did as they were told. And, in some cases, probably did so quite happily, having no other model from which to learn.

No sane female would ever want to return to a world in which women's lives were so constrained, but the way we live now places a whole other set of stresses on us, because the business of having it all invariably means doing it all. Much as we might hope to be heading into a utopian future in which responsibility for both children and, increasingly, the care of elderly parents is shared equally between men and women, there seems little evidence of that happening to any great extent. There are exceptions, of course, but biology still seems to ensure that men actively want to be protectors and providers while women want to take the main responsibility for the raising of their children. There's nothing wrong with this, and, if both parties are happy, it's a model for a conflict-free life.

But just how many women in the 21st century aspire to no more than that? Precious few, and of them, even fewer feel they can admit it because our success in education has made us feel obliged to do something "useful" with it all. Expectation is not just confined to women, either. Both sexes nowadays have material expectations far in excess of what they once were. Nice houses, two cars, regular holidays; all these ensure that, even for the least ambitious woman, paid work is not something with which to fill some free time, but an essential for a modern lifestyle, whether it's work they enjoy or otherwise. And often it isn't that at all; while many men are busy forging satisfying careers, their wives and partners are often in low-skill employment in order that they can devote enough time and mental energy to looking after their families too.

Economist and author of the acclaimed *Freakonomics*, Steven Levitt, seems to argue that this is nothing other than logical. He feels that if it's true, which, incidentally, he's not himself convinced of, a part of the reason for women's current reported lower levels of happiness stems from it being artificially inflated back in the 1970s because the expectations of the feminist movement were so high. He also points out that if women's lives, which they are, become more like men's, it's no wonder they now report less happiness and more stress.

But does this mean that for the sake of our happiness quotient, we should throw away our BlackBerrys, ditch our inner Mirandas, and quit the boardroom for a life of baking cakes? Absolutely not. Because, happily, there's some good-news research out there too.

Next time you find yourself beached up on a stool in the corner of the wine bar while your less academically able sisters are all making merry with the talent, you might want to locate a suitable looking male and point out that not only in chilled lager do Australians have it licked.

Over there, a study using data from their national Household Income and Labour Dynamics survey found that men in search of happiness should stay away from the all those nice-but-dim women and instead set their sights on marrying someone smart.

Apparently every extra year of education a woman has under her belt significantly increases the chances that her husband will report being highly satisfied with life.

Proof positive that smart single women needn't worry. Soon the men will cotton on and want to whisk them up the aisle. How she feels once the honeymoon period's over and she's back on her hamster wheel, doing-it-all, is, of course, quite another matter. One that's no doubt already being researched.

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