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OP-ED COLUMNIST

## Blue Is the New Black

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WASHINGTON

Women are getting unhappier, I told my friend Carl.

“How can you tell?” he deadpanned. “It’s always been whine-whine-whine.”

Why are we sadder? I persisted.

“Because you care,” he replied with a mock sneer. “You have feelings.”

Oh, that.

In the early ’70s, breaking out of the domestic cocoon, leaving their mothers’ circumscribed lives behind, young women felt exhilarated and bold.

But the more women have achieved, the more they seem aggrieved. Did the feminist revolution end up benefiting men more than women?

According to the General Social Survey, which has tracked Americans’ mood since 1972, and five other major studies around the world, women are getting gloomier and men are getting happier.

Before the ’70s, there was a gender gap in America in which women felt greater well-being. Now there’s a gender gap in which men feel better about their lives.

As Arianna Huffington points out in a blog post headlined “The Sad, Shocking Truth About How Women Are Feeling”: “It doesn’t matter what their marital status is, how much money they make, whether or not they have children, their ethnic background, or the country they live in. Women around the world are in a funk.”

(The one exception is black women in America, who are a bit happier than they were in 1972, but still not as happy as black men.)

Marcus Buckingham, a former Gallup researcher who has a new book out called “Find Your Strongest Life: What the Happiest and Most Successful Women Do Differently,” says that men and women passed each other midpoint on the graph of life.

“Though women begin their lives more fulfilled than men, as they age, they gradually become less happy,” Buckingham writes in his new blog on The Huffington Post, pointing out that this darker view covers feelings about marriage, money and material goods. “Men, in contrast, get happier as they get older.”

Buckingham and other experts dispute the idea that the variance in happiness is caused by women carrying a bigger burden of work at home, the “second shift.” They say that while women still do more cooking, cleaning and child-caring, the trend lines are moving toward more parity, which should make them less stressed.

When women stepped into male- dominated realms, they put more demands — and stress — on themselves. If they once judged themselves on looks, kids, hobbies, gardens and dinner parties, now they judge themselves on looks, kids, hobbies, gardens, dinner parties — and grad school, work, office deadlines and meshing a two-career marriage.

“Choice is inherently stressful,” Buckingham said in an interview. “And women are being driven to distraction.”

One area of extreme distraction is kids. “Across the happiness data, the one thing in life that will make you less happy is having children,” said Betsey Stevenson, an assistant professor at Wharton who co-wrote a paper called “The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness.” “It’s true whether you’re wealthy or poor, if you have kids late or kids early. Yet I know very few people who would tell me they wish they hadn’t had kids or who would tell me they feel their kids were the destroyer of their happiness.”

The more important things that are crowded into their lives, the less attention women are able to give to each thing.

Add this to the fact that women are hormonally more complicated and biologically more vulnerable. Women are much harder on themselves than men.

They tend to attach to other people more strongly, beat themselves up more when they lose attachments, take things more personally at work and pop far more antidepressants.

“Women have lives that become increasingly empty,” Buckingham said. “They’re doing more and feeling less.”

Another daunting thing: America is more youth and looks obsessed than ever, with an array of expensive cosmetic procedures that allow women to be their own Frankenstein Barbies.

Men can age in an attractive way while women are expected to replicate — and Restylane — their 20s into their 60s.

Buckingham says that greater prosperity has made men happier. And they are also relieved of bearing sole responsibility for their family finances, and no longer have the pressure of having women totally dependent on them.

Men also tend to fare better romantically as time wears on. There are more widows than widowers, and men have an easier time getting younger mates.

Stevenson looks on the bright side of the dark trend, suggesting that happiness is beside the point. We’re happy to have our newfound abundance of choices, she said, even if those choices end up making us unhappier.

A paradox, indeed.

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