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Marney Rich Keenan:

If women today have so much, then why are they so unhappy?



Some 30 years ago, when my generation of women sought to get our careers firmly in place before we had babies, my mother would marvel at all the choices that she never had.

I was a newspaper reporter. My closest friends included a chemical engineer, a lawyer, an interior designer and a successful (to this day) small business owner. "What you girls have accomplished is remarkable," she'd say.

And yet, as a homemaker who raised six children, I never got the sense that she would have traded places with my generation. Her husband, her children and the home she provided filled her with every happiness.

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In a sense, it might be easy to conclude my mother's happiness was derived from not knowing any better. But, I think she knew better all along.

Betsy Stevenson, an economist at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, recently published a research study on happiness data entitled "The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness." What she and her co-author, Justin Wolfers, found is pretty provocative, if not disturbing. Thirty five years ago, women reported being slightly happier than men. Today, the two have switched places. And not only has women's happiness steadily declined, the data is pervasive across demographic groups and in multiple countries.

"This new happiness gap is a puzzle because by almost any objective measure, women's lives have improved over the past 35 years," Stevenson said in an interview.

One would think that in the face of extraordinary progress -- more higher education degrees, control over our fertility, expanded freedoms within the family and in the labor force -- we'd be happier. Yet, the study suggests that greater equality doesn't necessarily equate to a heightened sense of well-being.

Stevenson says that may be because women compare themselves more with men today.

"In the past," says Stevenson, "women may have been more inclined to simply accept that their lives were going to be different from those of men and simply didn't attempt to measure their lives against men's lives. Now, if they look around them and see that similarly skilled men seem to have more opportunities, less discrimination, higher earnings, this can be incredibly frustrating."

But yet another explanation is that we're spreading ourselves too thin. Stevenson recounts a conversation with a business school graduate who had the same goals of her mother -- a well-kept house, a beautiful garden and well-adjusted children -- but also wanted a great career and make an impact on the broader world.

"Women have added areas in which they want to succeed but they have not reduced their expectations for themselves in other areas," Stevenson says. "They may be simply increasing the domains in which they expect themselves to excel."

Funny thing: In order to "have it all," we must "do it all."

Recently, I had a conversation with the daughter of a dear friend. She is a veterinarian in her early 30s, married and raising two toddlers. Lily works part-time, but says she wouldn't work at all if she wasn't in such heavy school loan debt. Not now anyway, while her kids are still little.

"I just never knew how much I would love motherhood," she said.

Stevenson surmises: "While women have more opportunities today than they had in the 1970s, they may have had more hope about the future in the 1970s. The elation of the women's movement may have temporarily boosted women's happiness in the past and now the cold reality is simply settling in."

My mother may not have had anything to which to compare it. Still, it seems she was happier than a lot of her counterparts these days.

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