

Feminist fantasy paints women into a corner

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When Ms. Magazine launched in 1971, as an insert in New York magazine, I was one month shy of my 13th birthday. You could call Ms. a benchmark in my adolescence, tangible evidence that the times they were a-changing.

You could also say that the timing of this magazine, that gave voice to the burgeoning feminist movement in America, and the timing of my adolescence and young adulthood aligned perfectly. If that's true, Ms. Magazine should have engendered a new way of life for me, and, more importantly, for the young men who were my contemporaries.

But it may have been too late for girls like me. We'd grown up with Easy Bake Ovens and Barbie Dream Houses, and the boys knew we had. We were a lost cause. To be effective, feminists had to begin preaching their message at birth, so baby girls and baby boys could literally grow up with the ideas and lead their lives accordingly. Surely the message of feminism has resonated with everyone a decade or so younger than I, right?

Wrong. It hasn't. Every single woman I know in her 20s or 30s wonders why, despite growing up with the notion of choices and non-traditional roles, women are the consumers whom marketers strive to reach with messages about harmonious family life (caring for aging parents and sick children). Decades later, women are still the target audience for commercials and print ads that carry spectacularly exciting news about laundry detergent, floor wax, furniture polish and how we can help our hamburger at dinnertime. Women still get bombarded with messages from a variety of media on how to look younger, prettier, sexier and more alluring to men. Why is that?

My theory is that the leaders of the women's movement forgot about one half of our society when they embraced their cause -- men. It's possible that men heard (and agreed with) something like the following sentiments when women first started to roar: "We want an education, we want jobs where we can use that education to climb the ladder of success, and we want to make more money than women are used to making in jobs women aren't used to having, to support ourselves or help support our families. And we want to have great sex, even without a wedding band." Women believed that this would make us happier -- that it would result in "having it all."

It hasn't. It has resulted in men being happier than women. In our haste to be equal members of society, we neglected to clarify whether or not most men wanted to change as well; to help create a new societal order by not living their fathers' lives; by sharing responsibilities equally with their partners instead. Newsflash: This didn't happen. Two recent studies, one by Alan Krueger, a Princeton economist, and another by Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers at the University of Pennsylvania, reached alarmingly similar conclusions about how men and women view their

lives today.

According to a New York Times article, over the past 40 years, men and women have "switched places" on the happiness scale. In the early 1970s, time-use studies revealed that men, presumably in traditional breadwinner roles, weren't as happy as women, presumably also in traditional roles. Today, the sexes have swapped: Men report they experience more happiness than women. Men seem to kick back more, while women take on more. Mr. Krueger studied the data closely and found that since the 1960s, men have gradually cut back on doing things they dislike. Smart move. Unfortunately, women have gradually started doing more of what we find tedious or unpleasant. Did anyone predict this during the marches?

The hard truth is that women aren't working longer. But we are doing different sorts of things, like more paid work for more hours. Regardless of the satisfaction that provides, it inevitably leads to doing less around the house (which feels stressful to many women), spending less time with family and friends and feeling discontent because we haven't achieved the "having it all" fantasy. Our to-do list grows longer; our time grows shorter.

We've not only come a long way; we've come almost full circle, baby, and painted ourselves into a proverbial corner, and one that's filled with dust bunnies to boot.

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