

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Margaret Wentz

If we're so equal, why aren't we happy?

For women, the desire to have it all comes with the obligation to do it all



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In 1963, an angry woman named Betty Friedan published a groundbreaking book about “the problem that has no name.” In it, she described the stifled lives of women in North America - talented, creative, and increasingly educated women who were trapped in the suburbs, leading lives of quiet desperation.

“Each suburban wife struggled with it alone,” she wrote. “As she made the beds, shopped for groceries ... she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question - ‘Is this all?’”

Both my mother and my mother-in-law belonged to that generation. Both were gifted women, and I often think how different their lives would have been if they had been born a generation later. They'd probably have developed substantial careers in science or medicine. As it was, one remained a small-town housewife all her life. The other, amazingly, got an MBA when she was 40 and went on to become the lone female executive in her field, with no support at all from her grudging husband.

Less than 50 years after *The Feminine Mystique*, the world is transformed utterly. At universities, women rule. They make up close to 60 per cent of all undergraduates finishing this year. They account for roughly half of all law and medical school graduates, and they get half the advanced degrees. Women head many major Canadian universities, as well as four of the eight Ivy League schools. They are no longer lonely figures on either Supreme Court. They make up almost half the work force, and mostly make as much as men.

Women are still conspicuous minorities in politics and the top ranks of business. Still, a credible woman ran for president of the United States. The outgoing female CEO of Xerox is being replaced by another woman, an African-American. Fifty years ago, these developments seemed far more inconceivable than, say, a trip to Mars. Today, women are doing so much better than men in so many areas that we ought to start a movement to save the males.

Which brings us to the loaded question: If women have made such stupendous progress, then why aren't we happier?

This is the interesting terrain explored in a recent study called *The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness*, by economists Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers. They found that over the past generation, women's self-reported happiness has decreased, both absolutely and relative to men. In spite of Ms. Friedan, women in the era of *The Feminine Mystique* typically reported *greater* subjective well-being than men did. But as their lives improved, their mood got worse. Today, the happiness gender gap has reversed. Neither men nor

women are as happy as they used to be, but women are now distinctly unhappier than men. This trend holds true across all demographic groups and all Western industrialized nations.

Why? Before some troglodyte concludes that women were better off barefoot in the kitchen, let me point out that measuring comparative happiness over time is a slippery proposition. The authors say as much. Maybe my grandma's generation's idea of "happiness" was much different from ours, in which case comparisons may not be all that meaningful.

It is also true that factors other than the obvious ones contribute in important ways to human happiness. For example, as countries get richer, there's not much evidence that people get happier. Fragmenting families, increased mobility, and the decline of organized religion mean that people are far freer from social constraints to strike out on their own path. But that also means that the glue that bound us together has dissolved. Liberation has a downside.

For women, the desire to have it all comes with the obligation to do it all. In other words, we need to accomplish much, much more than ever before in order to be happy. Now that we are liberated to compete with everyone, we compete with all the guys for the next promotion, and compete with Angelina Jolie to look really sexy, and compete with every other mom to be the perfect parent, and compete with Mother Teresa to be compassionate and good.

Naturally, we can never measure up.

Or we find out in midlife that the big career isn't what it's cracked up to be.

As far as I can tell, women in their 20s are as deluded about their futures as young women always were. The difference is that their expectations are so much higher.

Ross Douthat, a conservative-leaning columnist for The New York Times, guesses that women may prefer low-risk, egalitarian societies, which means that an age defined by high-stress, cowboy capitalism is bound to make them anxious. He also points out that the structures of American society "don't make enough allowances for the particular challenges of motherhood." Very true. But the happiness gap also exists in the warm and nurturing bosom of the European Union, which has generous parental leave and free daycare for all.

So who fares best in the happiness sweepstakes? The same group that always has - married men. Although both men and women report less satisfaction with their marriages than people did a generation ago (rising expectations again?), women say they are more dissatisfied than men. I don't think this is because husbands have gotten worse. (*Au contraire* - they have become spectacularly better in some areas, such as parenting and time spent on housework.) I think it's because women have a genetically hard-wired sense of responsibility. They have always been responsible for the nurturing and emotional heavy lifting. And now, they're responsible for their careers and half the family finances as well.

Even so, I doubt you'd find many women who want to turn back the clock. I can't imagine swapping my stress-filled, aggravating life for grandma's, even if she was happier than I am. Besides, happiness can be highly overrated.

Or maybe it's the case that women never have been all that happy. Maybe the cave women gazed across the roasting mastodon at their mates 50,000 years ago and wondered, "Is this all?" Maybe we have always wondered that. It's just that now, we feel free to say it out loud.

