

# Don't worry, be unhappy

If women are unhappier than men, it may be that contradictory pressures mean they have more to be unhappy about



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Women: you are all terribly sad now. This, anyway, is the message of "[The paradox of declining female happiness](#)," a new study by Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolvers of the University of Pennsylvania. The study, which takes into account various happiness surveys - these exist! And people are paid to conduct them! - from the 1970s to the present, comes to some fairly troubling conclusions: although women have better educations, better pay, more sexual and reproductive freedom, and a greater capacity for self-determination than ever before, we're less happy than ever.

"Women have become less happy, both absolutely and relative to men. Women have traditionally reported higher levels of happiness than men, but are now reporting happiness levels that are similar or even lower than those of men," quoth the study. It's a fairly sensational point. ([Feminism](#) has betrayed women! Don't you miss the days when all you had to worry about was birthing babies, cleaning kitchens, and satisfying your man? Well, you should!) However, as you read the study - which I have done, at great risk to my own personal happiness - it becomes clear that it isn't the whole story.

The questions raised by the research are many. For example: is it really wise to trust a study that cites the "[Virginia Slims American Women's Opinion Polls](#)?" Is it useful to come to conclusions about "women" as a whole from a study that cites strong upwards trends in happiness for both black men and black women (black women, it is noted, were less happy than black men in 1972; the opposite is true now), then abruptly switches back to lamenting those poor, depressed white ladies? Why focus on (white) women's declining happiness, when the fact is that both (white) women and (white) men have had an overall happiness decline? How does the narrative about declining female happiness fit in with the fact that fewer women now commit suicide? And, last but not most certainly not least, why does a study of such a fuzzy and subjective thing as "happiness" or "satisfaction" mean anything at all? Can't overall quality of life be measured by looking at harder, more objective data: things like crime rates, rates of unemployment or underemployment, or access to basic needs such as adequate health care and education? People can always find something to complain about, after all. That doesn't mean that their lives haven't objectively improved.

Yet the "happiness" question is interesting, precisely because it is so subjective. As [Susan Faludi](#) noted in her seminal work, *Backlash*, one of the primary tactics of anti-feminists is the argument that the freedoms provided by feminist progress will ultimately ruin women's lives. Women have access to birth control and abortion? Trot out the old [biological clock](#), and tell women they'll die childless if they don't conceive in their mid-twenties! Women are delaying marriage, and going for serial monogamy or casual sex instead? Tell them that it's more likely for them to be struck by lightning than to find a husband after the age of 30, and that hooking up lessens their "market value" for the menfolks! (Of course, there is a certain kind of woman that doesn't necessarily want to get married, and is frankly repelled by the idea of dating a man that would assign her "value" corresponding to her sexual inexperience or lack thereof: the anti-feminist answer to this, of course, is always some variant on, "oh, you will care - when it's too late.") Women have greater access to the professions of their choice? Say, does anyone have some stereotypes of bitter, unfulfilled, unfeminine career women to throw around?

Yet, when you look at the study, without the sensationalist "women: now sad" trappings, it doesn't seem to convey that women are descending into the black pits of despair. What it says is that women and men now experience similar levels of happiness: there's been an overall happiness decline (well, unless you take the increased happiness of black people into account - which, again, the study doesn't; nor does it seem to address other people of colour), with women's being slightly more precipitous than that of men. In other words, as women and men have become more equal, their subjective experiences of life have become ... more equal. Shocking!

Well, not if you're a feminist. The point of the movement has always been that women and men are more alike than they are different, and that it doesn't make sense to assign limited roles or grant access to social power and status based on something as arbitrary as gender, rather than talent or intelligence or work ethic.

It makes sense, doesn't it? If you have a job, you can lose your job. If you have sexual freedom, and the ability to try out multiple relationships before settling down (if you ever want to settle down), you're also going to break up with more people. If you have the ability to choose what you want to do with your life, it's also possible to fail at what you've chosen. That's true for everyone.

But oh, how infatuated the world at large seems to be with female failure! The old restrictions have lessened, but haven't gone away, and women are constantly being bombarded with contradictory expectations: be as good at your job as any man, but never lose that special feminine touch. Be pretty and sexy, but not so pretty and sexy that people can't take you seriously - and, for the love of God, not so sexy that you actually wind up having lots of sex. Get an education, work hard, be ambitious - but don't be so focused on your career that you can't find time for your man or your inevitable babies. Speaking of those babies, you should be having them, don't you think? Remember how sad you'll be if you don't have the babies! And, about the success thing: you should have some, but not too much of it. You don't want to scare the men off by getting more attention than they do.

If women are less happy than men, maybe it's just because they have more to work at than men, and therefore more chances to screw up. Which brings me to the main thing I learned from this study: we're not done yet. By the time that we are, it won't make sense to measure happiness - or any other basic human experience - by gender. We'll all just be people.