

## Mind and meaning: It's no longer a man's world...

**But are the women truly satisfied?**

By [Patricia Casey](#)  
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IT SEEMS obvious that women should be happier now than ever before.

After all, they have achieved much – choices that never existed for their grandmothers, and, even for some, their mothers, are now a given.

The gender gap has narrowed and women now inhabit professional areas that previously were the exclusive domain of men. Women now head banks, become pilots, hold senior positions in police authorities and have choices that extend to marriage and childbearing.

But sometimes choice has its price and what seems self-evident might be a mirage. This appears to be the finding from a recent US study called *The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness*. It was carried out by Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, from the University of Pennsylvania, and published by the National Bureau of Economic Research.

This investigation examined levels of happiness in women and men internationally. In the US the happiness of women has fallen absolutely and relative to that of men also. For example, in the 1970s women were reporting levels of happiness higher than that found in men while now these are lower.

In Europe, including Ireland, levels of happiness were found to have risen somewhat but less so than for men, and are now lower than in men. The pertinent question that needs to be answered is why this drop, if women have never, seemingly, had it so good?

The reflexive response is to suggest that in spite of the gains made by women in the workplace, the demands of home on top of work increases the burden on them. However the authors of the report challenge this by pointing to studies that demonstrate how the amount of time in domestic work has reduced over time among women while for men it has increased.

Such studies, of course, do not take account of extraneous tasks such as organising childcare, planning birthday parties and taking children for vaccinations and check-ups, which do not take much time but instead require a significant injection of mental energy.

Another possible explanation for these findings is that until recent decades, women were unable to disclose their true feelings about their predicament either due to a sense of helplessness or because of simple reticence consequent upon the prevailing attitudes of the time.

Others point to the gender gap in salaries between the sexes and argue that having to fight for an equitable wage may contribute to the increasing discomfiture of women. However, several recent studies have found that for happiness only the basic necessities are required and money in excess of these requirements does not increase happiness; indeed guilt from over spending may be just as likely.

Satisfying An unlikely contender, but a plausible one, is that women actually do not have the choices they had a few decades ago. They do not have a choice in whether to work outside the home or not, because of the shackles of gigantic mortgages. For many women, work outside the home, at least while children are very young, may be an essential part of existence rather than a fulfilling, satisfying part of existence.

Finally, women are essentially social and relational beings, who respond and thrive on relationships. It is this feature that makes them so prone to adverse reactions in the face of relationship losses, including depressive reactions.

However, the traditional networks that fostered these bonds have lessened significantly due to mobility, changes in community life and longer working hours away from the home environment. This shift may be an unintended consequence of the freedoms that women have gained.

It will be for future generations to decide if the priorities that marked their mothers' and grandmothers' lives still apply to them. Time will tell.

- Patricia Casey

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