

Ethics at Work: The paradox of choice and the Jewish problem

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Recently I wrote about a new research paper by Betsey Stevenson and Jason Wolfers documenting a "happiness gap" between women and men. In virtually all Western countries, women reported noticeably higher levels of well-being in the 1970s, but 30 years later their results are similar to those of men. Among the explanations suggested was the "paradox of choice" - a term used by American psychologist Barry Schwartz to describe the phenomenon whereby having more choice can lead to more pressure and more feelings of failure.

Stevenson and Wolfers studied the United States and most of the Western European countries, but their study did not include Israel. Using the Israeli Social Survey, I examined whether a similar trend is evident in Israel. To get a better idea of the trends, I looked separately at Israeli nonreligious Jews, religious Jews, haredi Jews and Arabs. (All categories are self-reported.) Since the Social Survey goes back only to 2002, I did not have 30 years of data but only six years.

A most encouraging finding is that between 2002 and 2007 reported life satisfaction improved for each of these four groups. In fact, life satisfaction improved for both sexes for all groups, with only a single exception: haredi men reported a noticeable drop in life satisfaction; in 2002 they were by far the most satisfied group in Israeli society, but by 2007 haredi women were.

Getting to the main point, for Israel as a whole, and for three of the four subgroups (the three largest), men made greater gains than women. So Israel fits the mold of a comparative slippage for women. But in Israel, gains were still reported for women's well-being, which is different than the US and Europe (where the survey period was different). The difference between men's gains and women's is about 2 percent of the well-being measure I used (based on sampling errors reported by the Central Bureau of Statistics, that can be statistically significant).

By far the biggest swings were in the Arab community, where men's well-being increased from about 8% behind women to near parity, and the haredi community, where men's well-being dropped from about 5% ahead of women to about 4% behind. (The men and the women basically switched places.) On the one hand, we need to keep in mind that these two populations are comparatively small subsamples, meaning large swings are to be expected. On the other hand, the changes are so dramatic that I think they deserve further study.

It is risky to read too much meaning into a relatively small change measured over a relatively short period of time. But given the size of the gap and the context of previous studies, I think there is much evidence that in Israel, as in Europe and the US, women lag behind men in translating increased prosperity into increased enjoyment.

Even if there really is a "paradox of choice" behind this gap, it is not desirable for society to deny people choices and opportunities. However, individuals may decide that they may want to forgo

opportunities, and society can seek ways to make choices less stressful.

The Stevenson and Wolfers study found the worst outcomes for women in the US, where there is the least degree of official government programs for working mothers. That policy is probably economically efficient, but it may also increase the stress on working mothers in a way that it not measured in economic statistics.

The increasing well-being that Israeli women report is a wonderful sign. Perhaps if we can find ways to make difficult life choices less stressful, their improvement will match that of men.

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