

May 31, 2009

LETTERS

Are Women Less Happy or Simply More Honest?

To the Editor:

Re "[Liberated and Unhappy](#)," by Ross Douthat (column, New York Times on the Web, May 26):

In their economics paper on the decline of women's happiness, Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers write in their discussion, "Women may now feel more comfortable being honest about their true happiness and have thus deflated their previously inflated responses" about their happiness.

They conclude that subjective measures of happiness may no longer reflect improved objective measures of happiness (as exemplified by declining suicide rates among women), and that the problem may be in the measures that psychologists and economists use to measure happiness — not, as Mr. Douthat writes, in women's lives.

Perhaps women now have the freedom to say what they actually feel. Few would argue that it would be worth reversing that.

Michael J. Ostacher
Cambridge, Mass., May 26, 2009

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To the Editor:

Ross Douthat calls for "some kind of social stigma" to discourage single motherhood. Some bones to pick:

The idea of a social stigma in any form in a liberal democracy is retrograde and repugnant. To lay that on single mothers, who are most in need of our support, and whose condition may be no fault of their own, is cruel and irrational.

The proposed stigma against single mothers must not be about their having sex out of wedlock; it must be about their failure to use protection. And yet, in many if not most elementary and high schools in America, sex education is off the table. Even if a woman wants to use protection, it is often, if not primarily, the man who refuses, in which case the stigma's object is misplaced.

I would be fascinated to know how the new social stigma — not rooted in the old sexism — that Mr. Douthat alluded to would work. If a single mother said, "Good day," would you ignore her? If she applied for a job, should a mother who is married or at least part of a (heterosexual) couple be given preference? Should President Obama denounce single mothers?

Neil Chesanow
Montvale, N.J., May 26, 2009

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