

Inquirer Opinion / Columns

<http://opinion.inquirer.net/inquireropinion/columns/view/20091025-232109/Not-happy-enough>

AT LARGE

At Large : Not happy enough

By Rina Jimenez-David

Columnist

Philippine Daily Inquirer

Posted date: October 25, 2009

MANILA, Philippines—In many ways, our mothers' generation had it good. "Choice" was an alien concept, as was autonomy. It was unthinkable for a woman of their generation to attempt to navigate through life on her own. To do so was to risk being labeled an "old maid," pitied and disdained, a loser in the matrimonial lottery.

Marriage and motherhood were not just goals, they defined one's destiny. They knew this was the life cut out for them, and all their life was but a preparation for the time they would meet the man they would marry (they at least hoped there was only one such man). The rest followed like a well-worn script: bear his children, manage their home, and then live vicariously through the sons and daughters she would raise, mostly on her own because while her husband was expected to support his family materially, he would be largely emotionally absent, lost in the "larger world" out there.

"Choice" was not just a matter of reproduction, for in fact even in this field she had no real choices, bearing the number of children "that God will give you," as her parish priest admonished. "Choice" was likewise inoperative in the rest of her life, from making her own money to deciding on a career; from having access to credit in her own name to choosing her domicile. (The law deemed that in case of a clash of opinions, her husband's choice should prevail.)

But given what seems from our point of view a most restricted, limited existence, women of our mothers' generation appeared happier, more content. Maybe, not knowing any other kind of life, or scared out of even contemplating the alternatives, they embraced their only options, fell headlong into domesticity and imposed their own social expectations on the rest of their peers and then on their daughters.

* * *

IN HER New York Times blog entry "When We're Equal, We'll be Happy," Judith Warner writes of a study (written by Wharton School professors Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers) finding that "despite the objective improvements to their lives over the past four decades, women today appear to be less happy than they were in 1972."

The 1970s, if you will remember, was the dawning of feminism, the years when a thousand consciousness-raising sessions bloomed, when women began to question most everything in their lives, but most especially their "place": in the home, in the kitchen, taking a backseat to their husbands or mates, who took for granted their open access to the wives' bodies, time and dreams.

It was a time of great optimism, even if in the Philippines martial law had just been imposed and an entire generation of political leaders found themselves sidelined and irrelevant. But for women, the decade was also a time to challenge conventions, to dare to be something other than wife and mother, and to nurse ambitions once deemed too lofty for a woman's constricted future.

What happened, then? Forty years after going after the dreams of "choice" and "autonomy," why are women—who have since penetrated the worlds of business, government, academe and the media, scoring victories and proving themselves the equals of their male colleagues—reporting themselves to be less than happy, or at least unhappier than they were when it all began?

* * *

FEMINIST writers that Warner quotes posit that it's all part of a "backlash," the academe's and the media's way of indicting feminism for having failed women.

But, says Warner, the study authors aren't the first to track female unhappiness over the years, and that they admit that "their numbers really don't tell us anything clear about why women now report being more unhappy, only that they do."

Besides, Warner notes, "happiness is hard to quantify; you can't measure it in a blood test, or map it in a mathematical equation It also tends to be relative; we judge our happiness, at least in part, against our expectations of how we are supposed to feel and how good we think life is supposed to be."

Maybe that's part of the answer. Having had our world-view opened up, our minds teased with endless possibilities, women may find

their day-to-day reality somewhat underwhelming. Our mothers, after all, didn't know any better, or different. We, however, know there is a whole world of "what-ifs" waiting for us, if only we were braver, smarter, more fashionable, richer, sexier, thinner and younger.

* * *

THEN there is the fact that many obstacles to women's equality—equality with men, which is one of feminism's main goals—still exist and in fact have and still do hinder women's march in the world that lay before them all those decades ago.

Writing of the situation in the United States, Warner cites a study that paints "a bleak portrait of women's non-progress in our day." The wage gap persists (a woman earning 73 cents for every dollar a man earns; in the Philippines, it's 45 centavos for every peso), a workforce and education system that are still sex-segregated; women channeled toward "low paid, low-status, low-security professions"; higher health costs for women; and discrimination against mothers.

So should women adjust their expectations downward, the better to confirm life experiences that have taught them and will teach them bitter lessons? Do men feel guilty for aspiring for more?

Concludes Warner: "Freedom, opportunity, respect, dignity, self-determination and equality—those universal human rights we somehow judge optional for women—do not make people unhappy. Only roadblocks to those entitlements do. Particularly when those impediments are packaged as what we 'really' want."

[^ Back to top](#)