

Women's Declining Happiness in the 20th Century

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Abstract

Warning to American women in the twenty-first century: your happiness is on the decline, feminism has something to do with it, and yes, it is reversible. This writing shows how the Women's Movement prompted the decline in the happiness of women relative to men, and how individual and systemic barriers to social equality continue to contribute to this decline. It also discusses how, in order to break down these barriers, reverse this negative trend, and allow women to maximize their happiness, women's leadership must continue and transform. One significant change is for women to embrace leadership in the public sphere, which includes opting out of the public labor force less than they do today.

Author's Note

Candace Fox is a senior at Barnard College majoring in Political Economy. Before attending Barnard, she would have been hard-pressed to come up with definitions for feminism and women's leadership. As a soon-to-be graduate, and an aspiring law student, she sought to apply her background in economics to her newfound understanding of the important role women in the labor force have to play in bringing about and maintaining an equitable society for individuals of both sexes and all genders. This writing is a much abbreviated account of the findings that helped her reach this understanding and her relevant arguments.

Keywords: Happiness, Feminism, Third Wave, Women's Leadership, Social Equality

1. Introduction

Growing up, women were, for the most part, the leading figures in my life. They were the mothers—my own and those of my peers—the teachers, and religious sisters who supervised all social and private aspects of my life, including my all-girls Catholic education. However, that is not to say that women were the leading figures in society. On the contrary, men led society by dominating the public sphere. At a young age this evaded my attention, but in retrospect, it was prevalent everywhere from the soccer field to church to the local 7-Eleven. It was not obvious to me because I did not know about the history of women's leadership, or about how this social structure would later affect my ability to make decisions that would lead to a happy life.

In college I faced the challenge of making decisions about my personal life and career. I had a plethora of choices and at first it did not seem like it would be difficult to choose the right path,

for I was always told that I would be happy as long as I pursued my interests. While there is truth to this, how would I discover what I wanted to pursue, and would it be enough to lead to a happy life?

My studies at Barnard helped me to answer these questions by framing them in the contexts of consumer economic theory and women's leadership. Consumer theory in economics holds that individuals make decisions that maximize their happiness, and it is based on the assumption that they have perfect information. According to this theory, people without perfect information about their choices will struggle to find happiness because they will not be able to make decisions that capitalize on their true desires. Women's leadership, a term that came into being with the emergence of feminism, is defined in this article as the work of women to attain true equality between women and men in society. Given these definitions, it seems that today many women, myself included, are not perfectly informed about the implications of their decisions. This is because they are unaware of the stereotypes and discrimination that work against them in society. Moreover, after the feminist movement the attainment of perfect information has become even more difficult for women who now have a greater number of opportunities and decisions to make. This in part explains why women today are experiencing a decline in their happiness relative to men. This paper adds to the discussion of women's leadership and the feminist movement by addressing the issue of social equality in light of women's happiness.

2. Data

Women's happiness in the United States has declined relative to that of men since the 1970s.¹ This trend holds true for all women regardless of marital and parenthood status. At first thought, it is hard to believe that women are less happy today than they were before 1970. After all, during the seventies the Women's Movement brought a greater number of economic, social, and political opportunities to women, allowing them to exert leadership outside the home. It is possible that the decline in women's happiness is a result of women's heightened expectations about the level of satisfaction they could achieve because of the expanded opportunities brought about by the Movement, and their subsequent failure to take advantage of these opportunities. This most likely occurred because women overwhelmingly did not change their preference for leading in the private sphere to leading in the public sphere. By not taking on public positions of leadership, women's economic, social, and political subordination to men continued. This is because women's lack of

¹ Stevenson, B., & Wolfers, J. (2009, May). "The paradox of declining female happiness." *National Bureau of Economic Research*, Working Paper 14969.

preference for leadership in the public sphere has perpetuated stereotypes about the traditional role of men as breadwinners and women as caregivers and has consequently led to enduring discrimination against women in the public sphere. Therefore, persistent social inequality is most likely the driving force behind the relative decline in women's happiness post-Women's Movement.

3. History

The Women's Movement began in the late nineteenth century and continues today in its third stage called the third "wave" of feminism. It began because women wanted to enjoy the full benefits of citizenship, which meant having the rights to vote and control their reproductive systems, among others.

The victories of the first wave included the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment (1919) that granted women the right to vote, increased participation in the labor force, and developing support of contraception in society. However, having equal rights with men did not mean having equal opportunities. This led women to fight for true social equality, which entailed having equal rights as well as equal opportunities as men.

In the mid-century, World War II called for the employment of several hundred thousand women in the labor force, a public realm from which they were traditionally barred. As a result, the female percentage of the U.S. labor force increased from 27% to 37%.² Unfortunately, when the war was over, women were forced out of these jobs and back into their homes to make way for the returning male soldiers. This injustice led women to demand the right to be treated as equals with men in the workforce in the second wave of feminism. These demands included the right to hold the same jobs and to receive the same pay. Moreover, married women demanded equality in their marriages because in order to work outside of the home while keeping their families in tact, they needed the emotional support of their husbands.

Women's victories in the realms of labor and reproductive rights were numerous. In the labor force, the Equal Pay Act (1963) made it illegal for employers to pay a woman less than what a man would receive for an identical job. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act (1964) made discrimination in employment on the basis of sex illegal. In reproductive rights, the Pregnancy Discrimination Act (1978) made it illegal to discriminate in employment on the basis of a woman's pregnancy or

² "American Women in World War II." *History.com*. (2010). Retrieved from <http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/american-women-in-world-war-ii>

intention to become pregnant and to force an able, pregnant woman out of work. Further, the judicial decision *Roe v. Wade* (1973) legalized abortion.

In spite of these victories, women still found themselves held back in the work place and pulled back into the home, both voluntarily and against their will. This happened because by maintaining their preference for leading in the private sphere, women signaled to men that they were unable to lead in the public sphere. In the labor market, this resulted in policies that were prejudiced against the promotion of women to high-level, time-consuming positions. The ultimate consequence was that social inequality remained.

The third wave, which continues today, involves efforts to combat this social inequality by addressing the issues left over from the second wave. Since the purpose of this article is to solve for the decline in women's happiness as a result of social inequality, it is a contribution to the third wave. By bringing awareness to the inequalities that exist in society and their causes, the goal is to empower women to make choices that will lead to their equality with men and greatest possible happiness. Today, achieving these goals calls for women to exert their leadership in the public labor force.

4. The Problem: The Labor Force and The Home

The labor force is an important sector of society because of its ability to confer economic and political power on its participants. Therefore, balancing the power of women and men in society will require achieving equality in the labor force. This has been a slow change and much progress still needs to be made. Women still exert a less powerful presence than men, and they are the subjects of discrimination. Together, these factors work against social equality.

Discrimination against women in the labor force is largely the result of gender schema. Gender schema refers to the way workers distinguish between leadership traits that they believe are socially appropriate for either men or women. Women are usually considered to be communal leaders, whereas men are expected to be agentic leaders. Communal leaders express compassion and sympathy, and are willing to help others. Agentic leaders express confidence, aggression, and ambition. Because women more often fall into the prefigured category of communal leader, they are consistently denied promotion to many upper level positions because the job is granted to someone with agentic traits, which are deemed more appropriate for men to possess and so are typically

associated with men. Women who demonstrate agentic traits are also at a disadvantage because gender schemas caused people to view their confidence and ambition as bossiness and abrasiveness.³

There are several implications of this prejudice. One implication is that women make less money than men. In the United States, the total pay gap between men and women is as large as 18-23%.⁴ A major source of this discrepancy is the fact that women occupy more part-time jobs and fewer full-time jobs relative to men. In 2011, only 73% of women occupied full-time positions compared to 88% of men.⁵ Furthermore, the part-time jobs women hold largely make up the economic tail end of the labor market. The reason women favor part-time employment is that it affords them the flexibility to work both inside and outside of the home. This points to another concern, which is that women are more likely than men to drop out of the workforce for some time in order to take care of home-life responsibilities.

“Off-ramping”⁶ is the act of leaving the workforce for an indefinite period of time, prompted by factors such as family life, job dissatisfaction, and physical relocation. This also significantly contributes to the wage and power gaps between men and women. Nearly 37% of professional women take off-ramps, compared with only 24% of men. Specifically, 44% of women off-ramp family for family reasons, whereas only 12% of men do so for the same reason.⁷ Furthermore, women in heterosexual relationships are more likely to off-ramp if the man makes more money, which, as the data proves, is likely to be the case.

In spite of the fact that men have begun to take on more domestic roles, women still take up a larger proportionate share of home responsibilities. Over time women have even increased the amount of time that they spend on household activities. The figures for the numbers of hours per week spent on household activities for men and women were 2.6 and 10.6 respectively, in 1956, compared to 6.5 and 12.9 in 2000.⁸ This has led to a phenomenon dubbed as “the second shift,”⁹ in which, aggregating across firm and household responsibilities, women work longer hours than men. From the 1960s to the 1970s, which coincided with the peak of the Women's Movement, women

³ Eagly, A. H., & Carli, L.L. “Women and the Labrynth of Leadership.” *Harvard Business Review*. (2007, Sep.)

⁴ United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Women in the Labor Force: A Databook*. Washington, D.C. (2013, Feb.).

⁵ Ibid, 73-76.

⁶ Hewlett, S.A. “Off-ramps and On-ramps: Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success.” *Harvard Business Review*. (2005, March).

⁷ Ibid, 45.

⁸ Eagly, A. H., & Carli, L.L.

⁹ Hochschild, A. R., & Machung, A. *The second shift*. New York: Penguin Books. (2003).

worked roughly fifteen hours more each week than men, which over the course of a year equated to an extra month of twenty-four-hour days.¹⁰ Today, then, this figure has increased even more.

Although the wage discrepancy between men and women has influence over women's motivation to off-ramp, there is also another, perhaps greater factor. This is that women prefer to lead in the private sphere, regardless of whether or not they also lead in the public sphere. This is evidenced in the results of a survey of highly educated men and women workers about their values and enjoyments. The survey results revealed that men were much more eager to get to the top of the leadership ranks than were women. Specifically, almost half of the males considered themselves very ambitious compared to about a third of the women. High priorities for women included work and workplace characteristics such as social atmosphere, respect for authenticity, flexible schedule, and meaningful work.¹¹ Author and public figure Anne Marie Slaughter, drawing on her experience as a mother and leader in the public and academic realms, also believes that women respond differently than men do to issues involving the home and the family. She states, "men seem more likely to choose their job at a cost to their family, while women seem more likely to choose their family at a cost to their job."¹² Many high-powered woman leaders in addition to Slaughter, including Hilary Clinton, Sheryl Sandberg, and Debora Spar have all acknowledged the same trend.

So, what does this mean for women's leadership and the goals of achieving social equality and optimal happiness? It means that instead of working towards these goals, women strive for perfection, falsely thinking that it will lead to power and happiness. Debora Spar articulates this point when she states that, "today women and girls...have fallen headlong into a stubborn pattern of believing that anything less than 'all' in their lives is proof only of their shortcomings."¹³ She goes on to say how this way of thinking was prompted by feminism, which "was about removing a fixed set of expectations from women, freeing them to be what they wanted and behave as they desired."¹⁴ As a result of this, Spar also talks about "the princess effect" and how mothers began to raise their girls to think that they were princesses, in effect giving them "little education in how to be a wife or mother and yet also little preparation in what it takes to succeed in life once the princess glare dies down."¹⁵ This also points to the trend that young women today are not educated about the

¹⁰ Ibid, 3.

¹¹ Hewlett, S.A.

¹² Slaughter, A. M. "Why Women Still Can't Have It All." *The Atlantic*, 92. (2012, June 3).

¹³ Spar, D. *Wonder Woman: Sex, Power, and the Quest For Perfection*. New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 33. (2013).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid, 47.

individual and systemic barriers at work against social equality, and about how to make choices, such as leading in the public sphere, that will eliminate these barriers and, as a result, maximize their happiness later on in life.

5. The Solutions: Systemic and Individual

In order to achieve the goals of social equality and optimal happiness, policies and practices in the public realm must change to give women the same opportunities as men to obtain and maintain high positions of public leadership.

One meaningful practice would be for employers to train women early on for top management positions and to have a path for them to get back to work if they off-ramp. This is important since the prospect of going back to a low paying and unfulfilling job is influential in many women's decisions to remain out of the workforce. It would also give heterosexual, married women more financial bargaining power with their husbands. The result might be that fewer women would leave the workforce and the ones that do might stay out for shorter periods of time. Not only would this give women greater opportunities to reach the upper echelons of leadership, but it would also allow companies to profit from the investments they make in their female employees.

Another important change in the policy realm would be for employers to give equal childcare leave to men and women. When it comes to having a family, women take more time off than men. Although factors such as biology, money, and preference explain this phenomenon, it is a fact that women are given more family-leave time than men. If both men and women were given the same enticements in regards to family-leave, then women, provided that they preferred to do so, would have equal opportunities to sustain their public leadership positions.

Even with these changes in the public labor force, closing the equality and happiness gaps between men and women will not be possible unless stereotypes and discriminatory practices on the basis of sex that are prevalent in society and predominant in the public sphere are exterminated. The main focus of this writing and the following paragraphs is empowering women to eliminate these stereotypes.

The first crucial step is for women to cease thinking that they can and must "have it all." This is necessary because it will help women to change their preferences for being leaders in the private sphere as opposed to the public sphere. To convince women to do so will require education about the stereotypes and practices prevalent in society and the public sphere. With this knowledge they will better understand that occupying public positions of leadership is necessary in order to

achieve social equality and an optimal level of happiness. As a result, they will be better equipped to make decisions concerning their leadership roles that are in their best interests. In regards to the labor force, they will most likely choose to opt out for shorter periods of time, or not at all.

Through conversations with ordinary women about the impact of feminism on their lives, there was a common sentiment among them. This sentiment is captured by the quote of one woman in particular who, seeking anonymity, said, “I wish I knew more about my choices so that I could have had the courage to live the life that I wanted.” This shows that by educating young women today about social realities, the feeling of anxiety about striving for perfection can be eradicated. As a consequence, women will be able to work towards social equality.

It is also from my own experience that I realize the benefits and importance of receiving an education in women’s leadership. With little education about the Women’s Movement, I went to college thinking that I could have it all. However, in learning about women’s leadership, I realized that to live the life of my choosing I had to make reasoned choices that considered the challenges I would face and with which I could ultimately find happiness.

Unfortunately, many women do not receive this education. This means that a large part of women’s unhappiness stems from the fact that they are holding themselves back from achieving their goals and maximizing their happiness. With an education in women’s leadership, women can change their preferences to meet these goals. This change, coupled with changes in public practices, would allow women to make choices that lead them to greater levels of equality and happiness.

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