

# MOTHERHOOD YIELDS HAPPINESS

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As we approach Mother's Day, it is inspiring to note that mothers are among the happiest persons on earth. Interestingly, this has nothing to do about being a woman: It is women who have families who are the happiest. Indeed, the obverse is also true: single women are among the least happy.

The most authoritative data on social wellbeing is found in the United States General Social Survey. Each year since 1972, it asks men and women how happy they are. What the researchers found is that women report being less happy each year. So what accounts for the change?

The feminist revolution in the 1960s explains a good part of this societal shift. It gave way to greater women's equality in law, education and the workplace. Indeed, the gains have been impressive. But why has this not translated into greater happiness? More pointedly, if women went forward in achieving educational and occupational success, why have they gone backwards in achieving happiness?

Neuroscience News reported on this subject in 2023, and what they found is startling.

"Something strange is going on in women's happiness research. Because despite more freedom and employment opportunities than ever before, women have higher levels of anxiety and more mental health challenges, such as depression, anger, loneliness and more restless sleep. And these results are seen across many countries and different age groups."

Equality before the law is a noble goal, but its relationship with happiness is tenuous at best. We know from a mountain of evidence that happiness is best achieved when people's interactions with others are positive, and this begins in the

family. To put it differently, social bonds matter more than stock bonds.

Women, in general, may not be as happy today as they were compared to women who lived before the 1970s, but it remains true that married women with children fare well. For example, we know from the results of the General Social Survey in 2022 that men and women who have the benefit of a spouse and children are the most likely to report being “very happy” with their lives.

Importantly, it was also revealed that among married women with children between the ages of 18 and 55, 40 percent reported they are “very happy,” compared to 25 percent of married childless women, and just 22 percent of unmarried childless women.

The idea that motherhood yields happiness is consistent with Catholic teachings. As Saint John Paul II said, women are called by their nature to be mothers; it is part of their “feminine genius” to serve their children. Furthermore, their calling is to “humanize humanity,” a task that signifies their unique abilities.

It is undeniable that the feminist revolution played a major role in accounting for the declining happiness of women. Not by accident was it led by women intellectuals who devalued masculinity and motherhood, often viciously so.

Betty Friedan led the way by deriding the housewife’s dependence on her husband; she contended that women lived vicariously through their husbands and children. Women had become so infantile, she said, that their passive existence resembled a “comfortable concentration camp.” The feminine mystique, she maintained, “has succeeded in burying millions of women alive.”

Friedan, of course, lived a pampered lifestyle. She was bored and unhappy. But she was not representative of most women.

Millions of women found happiness in suburbia, and millions of working-class and poor women desperately wanted to live in her "comfortable concentration camp."

Other feminists at that time made Friedan look conservative.

Shulamith Firestone declared that "pregnancy is barbaric," saying it is unfair that "half the human race must bear and rear the children." Vivian Gornick contended that to be a housewife was to be in "an illegitimate profession." Linda Gordon insisted that "the nuclear family must be destroyed." Gloria Steinem pleaded that we have to "abolish and reform the institution of marriage." And Kate Millett said we must abolish all "traditional sexual inhibitions and taboos." No wonder she spent many years in the asylum.

All of these women lived dysfunctional lives and were miserably unhappy.

So what exactly was it about the feminist revolution that led to such a sharp increase in women's unhappiness? For one, those who led it were more interested in women's autonomy than they were in enhancing their happiness. Importantly, radical feminist ideas were not limited to the classroom—they found expression in law and public policy.

From this perspective, it was better for women not to be married so they could achieve success in the workplace. In other words, feminists cared not a fig about what made women truly happy. If they had, they would have encouraged them to get married and have a family. They did just the opposite.

It is a very bad sign for society that the marriage rate and the birth rate have fallen. But at least for women who are mothers, and who put their children first, it is comforting to know they have a happiness advantage over the rest of us. Happy Mother's Day.