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# Feminism Unfulfilled — Why Are So Many Women Unhappy?

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“The woman’s movement wasn’t about happiness.” That judgment, attributed to feminist Susan Faludi, seems to be the blunt assessment shared by many other women. As numerous recent studies now indicate, a remarkably large percentage of women describe themselves as increasingly unhappy.

This issue came to light last month in a fascinating essay by Maureen Dowd of *The New York Times*. Dowd, whose columns often reveal the nation’s *Zeitgeist*, cited the fact that a number of major studies indicate that “women are getting gloomier and men are getting happier.” She asked: “Did the feminist revolution end up benefiting men more than women?”

A very similar set of questions arises from *TIME* magazine’s current cover story and special report, “[The State of the American Woman](#).” As the cover of the magazine explains, “A new poll shows why they are more powerful — but less happy.”



Reporter Nancy Gibbs traces the vast changes brought about by the feminist revolution. “It’s funny how things change slowly, until the day we realize they’ve changed completely,” she observes. As she documents, these changes are easily visible in contemporary America:

*In 1972 only 7% of students playing high school sports were girls; now the number is six times as high. The female dropout rate has fallen in half. College campuses used to be almost 60-40 male; now the ratio has reversed, and close to half of law and medical degrees go to women, up from fewer than 10% in 1970. Half the Ivy League presidents are women, and two of the three network anchors soon will be; three of the four most recent Secretaries of State have been women.*

Along the way, Gibbs also traces more fundamental changes. With remarkable understatement she simply notes “the detachment of marriage and motherhood” among other transformations. “Women no longer view matrimony as a necessary station on the road to financial security or parenthood,” she explains.

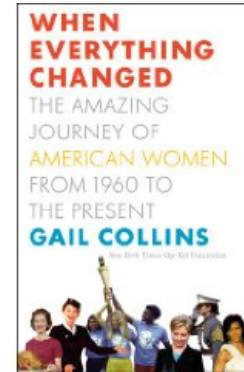
Nevertheless, “Among the most confounding changes of all is the evidence, tracked by numerous surveys, that as women have gained more freedom, more education and more economic power, they have become less happy.”

Gibbs cites a growing body of research that documents this trend toward unhappiness. In “[The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness](#),” [pdf file] published in the *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, economists Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers explain that women in the 1970s “reported higher subjective well-being than did men.” Now, the opposite is the case.

The big question raised by these studies is this: Has feminism produced unhappiness among women? That question is inescapable when seen in light of the historical context. The great transformation of society by feminism took shape only after the 1970s. As a political and social movement, feminism has been stunningly successful. In the span of a single generation, the society has been overwhelmingly transformed. But, over the same period, women report themselves less

happy, especially as compared to men.

As Gail Collins notes in her new book, *When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present*, the pace of this transformation has been absolutely stunning. “The cherished convictions about women and what they could do were smashed in the lifetime of many of the women living today,” she observes. “It happened so fast that the revolution seemed to be over before either side could really find its way to the barricades.”



Nevertheless, Collins, also a columnist for *The New York Times*, concluded: “The feminist movement of the late 20th century created a new United States in which women ran for president, fought for their country, argued before the Supreme Court, performed heart surgery, directed movies, and flew into space. But it did not resolve the tensions of trying to raise children and hold down a job at the same time.”

These tensions have erupted as flash points in our national conversation over recent years. Some feminists have accused women who decide to stay home with their children as “letting down the team.” Gail Collins cites Marlyn McGrath Lewis, director of undergraduate admissions at Harvard University as saying, “It really does raise this question for all of us and for the country: when we work so hard to open academics and other opportunities for women, what kind of return do we expect to get for that?”

The essays by Maureen Dowd and Nancy Gibbs both raise the fundamental question of feminism – Has it led to greater unhappiness among women? Dowd and Gibbs remain committed feminists. Nevertheless, as Dowd notes, feminism has served to increase the burdens upon women, even as it promised to open doors.

Sadly, most feminists seem incapable, given their ideological commitments, of asking the hardest questions. “Progress is seldom simple,” Gibbs explains, “it comes with costs and casualties, even challenges about whether a change represents an advance or a retreat.”

In reality, feminism was never only about opening doors for women. In order to make the case for the vast social transformation that feminism has produced, the feminist movement aspired to nothing short of a total social, moral, and cultural revolution. Along the way, feminism redefined womanhood, marriage, motherhood, and the roles for both men and women.

Nevertheless, it appears that most women are uncomfortable with this total package. Instead of producing a vast expansion of happiness among women, the feminist movement must now answer for the fact that women, by their own evaluation, appear to be less happy than before the revolution.

The reason for this is probably quite simple. Women are in the best position to evaluate, not only what feminism has gained, but what it has lost. Maybe Susan Faludi is right – The women’s movement wasn’t about happiness.

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I discussed this topic on Thursday’s edition of *The Albert Mohler Program* with special guest [Dr. Denny Burk](#), Dean of [Boyce College](#).

