

The Goddess That Failed

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A recent poll has shown that [a majority of young people think feminist laws and policies have gone too far](#) and now discriminate against men. It's good to see reaction against anti-male discrimination.

For International Women's Day, let's also consider feminism's impact on women, and recognize that it's been very bad there too.

Not just radical feminism. Not just the hateful or fringe variety. The whole thing, with its [sob stories and sentimental celebrations](#), its [exaggerations and cover-ups](#), its [relentless focus on the demands and alleged needs of one half of humanity at the expense of the other](#), has been a monumental disaster.

For over 50 years, the movement has been mired in [fraudulent claims](#), [myopia](#), [special pleading](#), [double standards](#), [abandonment of principles](#), [manifold hypocrisies](#), and [emotional incontinence](#).

It has continually [misrepresented the situation of women and men](#), and has induced in its female adherents an [unhealthy mix of wounded self-regard, festering resentment, and self-righteous indignation](#), often overlaid with an unfounded conviction of [moral superiority](#) and [contempt for the unenlightened](#).

And despite its energetic [stroking of the feminine ego](#) and repeated assurances that women are [innocent of wrongdoing](#); despite also the various [perks and exemptions](#), the fawning media representations, and the [outsized public sympathy](#); despite steady exhortations of “[You go, girl!](#)” and promises of all that must still be done to [protect, promote, succor, and bless the female of the species](#), the movement has not managed to make women happier or more satisfied than when it first took hold in the 1970s.

In fact, the opposite has occurred. Women are significantly *less happy* than previously.

An article in *Neuroscience News* for September, 2023 sounded the alarm, calling it “[The Paradox of Progress: Why More Freedom Isn't Making Women Happier](#).” In the same year, CNN reported that the Population Reference Bureau was identifying a [marked decline in well-being among millennial women](#). In 2022, David G. Blanchflower and Alex Bryson declared that across time and space, “[women are unhappier than men](#) [...] and have more days with bad mental health and more restless sleep.” Oft cited is a large meta-study from 2009 called “[The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness](#),” which demonstrated the persistence of women's decreasing happiness across the decades.

What these feminist academics and journalists call a *paradox* may seem fairly straightforward to the rest of us: movements based on assertions of angry victimhood are not likely to produce happy customers. But before fleshing out that conclusion, let's take a look at the pundits' attempts to deny the obvious.

[“The Paradox of Progress”](#) in *Neuroscience News* outlines the problem thus: “Despite having 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.” The article is typically feminist in its teeter-totter balancing act between two conflicting priorities: to assure readers that women are superior to men—in this case, “more emotionally resilient,” with “more intimate” friendships, greater “capacity for personal growth,” and commitment to “more altruistic endeavors”—while also stressing that women have it worse than men—in this case, are more depressed, lonelier, and more anxious.

It would seem that *both* cannot be true—capacity for intimacy, for example, ought to decrease loneliness—but the article attempts to resolve the contradiction by falling back on a third feminist chestnut: that women are (justly, of course) “unhappy at how society treats them.” All the emotional resilience in the world, it seems, cannot make up for that.

Yet a niggling sense of incoherence persists. If women indeed have more freedom and more opportunities than they've ever had before, wouldn't that indicate that “society” (which surely includes women as well as the men who made possible the increasing freedoms and opportunities) is treating women better than formerly?

Might it be, then, that women's perception of poor treatment is simply that—a perception, a belief, a feeling, produced not by any systemic mistreatment but by repeated feminist claims about it? The article provides no explanation other than links to two articles, one about women's burden of work in India (!) and the other about British women's self-reported experiences of “sexual harassment, bullying, or verbal abuse” at work, with no comparative data on men's self-reported experiences. The article ends with a fizzle, advising women to get therapy, enjoy nature, and increase their activity levels, though if women *are* being harassed and bullied into depression, adding a few aerobics workouts to their schedule will hardly compensate.

The 2009 meta-study [“The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness,”](#) by University of Pennsylvania researchers Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, attempts to provide a much fuller analysis of similar findings; it too, however, does little more than recapitulate feminist talking points. This study discovered that in all domains of life queried, and across all demographic groups and geographical areas in the United States—with the unexplained exception of black women—women's reported happiness levels have diminished since the 1970s, both in absolute terms (in comparison to women of previous eras) and in relation to men. The report emphasizes the surprising

nature of the results: while labor force outcomes, particularly real wages and job numbers, have significantly improved for women, *women are not feeling better about their lives.*

The researchers don't claim to have a definitive answer to the puzzle, but they consider a number of theories, most of them feminist. One is that as women are working more outside the home, the total amount of work that women do has increased, creating stress. The researchers admit that most time-use surveys do not support such an assertion: women's work in the home has actually decreased as a result of time-and labour-saving technology, and men are doing more household work than in the past. Thus, the researchers consider refinements to this theory.

They mention the idea that women have maintained the "emotional responsibility for home and family." Men may be putting in more hours on housework, but the "burden of home production," as they call it, is still primarily born by women. The fact that such a thing cannot possibly be measured makes it an attractive theory for feminists, and our researchers mention it with the respect that baseless feminist theories are often given. Another theory mentioned by the researchers, also conveniently unmeasurable, is that men's mix of outdoors work and household responsibilities is more pleasant than women's.

All of these explanations partake of a familiar trend in feminist thought that alleges that the women's movement actually benefited men more than it benefited women: somehow men, though in the main seen as anti-feminist, have still managed to work it to their advantage. Also partaking of the "men benefit" conspiracy theory—though locating the conspiracy in nature rather than society—is the idea that while it's men's real wages that have declined since the 1970s, the resulting decline in household income bothers women more than it bothers men. In other words, both men and women are suffering economically, but women are feeling the pain more.

More interestingly, in my opinion, the researchers also briefly mention two other speculative explanations that have to do with the psychology of utopian mass movements. They suggest that women's decline in satisfaction may stem from a greater tendency among women today to compare their lives with men's lives, and also a tendency to measure their lives against the euphoric promises of the feminist movement.

These latter two possibilities make some sense. Women do compare their lives to those of men more than they once did, and they have been encouraged to believe that their lives are much more difficult than men's. Most women, in fact, have no idea what men actually do in the world or what their lives are like, and they are actively discouraged from thinking about men's difficulties. Relatedly, women tend to contrast the state of their lives, with their various disappointments and troubles, to the promises of empowerment held out by the feminist movement; naturally, they find that the feminist dream has not been realized. Men, unlike women, tend not to compare their

lives to those of women and have little expectation of utopian perfection.

The researchers do not explore these hypotheses in any detail, and in general they shy away from speculating about the impacts of the feminist movement on female mindsets. But it would be hard for any honest analyst looking at the study to avoid the conclusion that feminism has been a flop.

Feminists themselves, of course, have many ways of explaining the apparent “paradox,” most of the explanations having to do with the persistence of supposed male privilege; conveniently, their explanations always lead to calls for more to be done for women. But such excuses can work only so long. After a certain number of years during which all the measurable goals of feminism are being fulfilled, the assertion that it isn’t enough rings hollow.

The almost inevitable conclusion that arises, not mentioned in the report, must be that more feminism may well lead to even greater female unhappiness. Rising wages, sexual freedom, vastly increased political participation, the ability to abort one’s children without compunction, the ability to divorce one’s husband and still live off his earnings, the ability to act like a slut and be applauded for it—none of these are having the good impact that feminist leaders such as Simone De Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, Kate Millett, and Shulamith Firestone, to name only a few, said they would. It’s worth noting that, according to the 2009 report, even women who are not pursuing a career, accessing abortion, divorcing their husbands or in other ways living the life encouraged by feminism also report declining happiness: sadly, *feminism has affected the cultural air all women breathe*.





In the final paragraph of the report, the authors quote a researcher named Ed Diener who raises a significant issue about the complexity of happiness. They quote him to the effect that “objective conditions such as health, comfort, virtue or wealth” are “notably absent” from subjective well-being. Being in good health, in other words, has some role to play in happiness, but one can be miserable despite it. The word that jumped out from Diener’s list was *virtue*, a word that is otherwise absent from this report and from most modern considerations of women’s condition. It was not so for most philosophers of happiness until our own era. For the ancient Greek and Christian philosophers, happiness was not a particular kind of feeling but a life governed by reason and ethical practice.

Previous generations of women were taught that happiness related directly to virtue, and virtue consisted in living for others, being loyal, being a helpmeet to one’s husband, devoting oneself to one’s children, or in some other manner pursuing a good life—as a nun or a healer, a mystic or a scholar. Feminism deliberately turned such an idea on its head. Ideals of chastity, fidelity, self-sacrifice, self-control and loving kindness were, according to feminism, the imposed ideals by which men prevented women from pursuing their desires. Feminism was about *self-fulfillment*.

In the years since the 1970s, discussion of female goodness has essentially been ruled out of bounds. While men have always been measured (and measured themselves) against a standard of the good man—one who supports his family, including his wife, defends justice, achieves distinction in the public sphere, protects the weak, and defeats evil—the ideal of the good woman has become a pre-1960s relic. Ask a feminist what a good woman is, and she will either laugh scornfully and refuse to answer, or say that a good woman fights against patriarchy. In other words, she’ll give you an oppositional identity with little or no positive content. The real problem with feminism for women is that it destroyed the positive content of womanhood and replaced it with useless anger.

Traditional philosophers have always been divided as to whether being virtuous is sufficient for happiness, but they were agreed that without virtue, happiness was impossible. In being opposed to virtue, feminism has undermined sources of real happiness. On International Women’s Day, we should heed the warning that more feminism will lead to even greater bitterness and dissatisfaction.

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