



Are You Happy With the Shape of Your Bikini Wax?

Friday 02 October 2009

by: Gloria Feldt, truthout | Perspective

When my son David was a gangly 14-year-old with a class assignment to research his ancestral roots, we drove 360 flat miles from Odessa, Texas, to Dallas to visit my grandmother. After she'd hugged and pinched us to determine if we'd been eating properly, David pulled out his scribbled questions. "Bubba," he asked, "What did you do for fun when you were a teenager?"

"Fun?" She looked perplexed.

I'm sure Grandmother found ways to have fun in her youth, as most kids do. But fun is culturally defined. And growing up in Russia during World War I, with far fewer choices than today's teens enjoy, she simply couldn't imagine fun as a goal unto itself.

When I came upon author-consultant Marcus Buckingham's recent [Huffington Post article](#), whipping up a froth from a longitudinal study of [self-assessed happiness](#), I thought of Grandmother - and how my life experience as an activist persuaded me a quest for happiness - also a cultural construct - without purpose is futile.

Reading on, I found a misogynist misuse of data that worked me into a froth of my own. In language designed to attract clients to the "personal strengths" guru in perpetuity, Buckingham concludes that liberation makes women increasingly unhappy. The dreaded F-word, feminism, is clearly the culprit for giving us all these nasty new options:

The hard-won rights, opportunities, and advantages were supposed to have netted women more than just another burdensome role to play - "you at work." They were supposed to have fostered in each woman feelings of fulfillment and happiness, and even, for the special few, the sustained thrill of living an

authentic life. This hasn't happened ... life is, in most ways we can measure, becoming more draining instead.

How silly of us. Who would want to be able to make choices, realize her potential in life and perhaps even contribute to society in the bargain?

But wait. Caryl Rivers, author of "Selling Anxiety: How the News Media Scare Women," alerts us that the authors of the report Buckingham cites cautioned against making such sweeping assumptions about their data because the gender differences are so small **as to be negligible**:

The researchers, who had no ax to grind, made no bones about the limits of the study. It was only the journalistic commentators who exaggerated the importance of the findings.

One could as readily attribute the shared slide in reported happiness to men's insecurity about their loss of power over women. But only women are the subject of media speculation. While other experts have debunked Buckingham's metrics as well as his **conclusions**, even a novice could spy a trope that has relentlessly fostered women's feelings of inadequacy faster than you can holler, "Backlash!"

After all, unhappiness sells, and not just to Buckingham's readers.

Women are constantly bombarded by media images that scream out: You must be buffed up, dressed up, made up and sexed up at all times. The covers of popular women's magazines suggest that the shape of one's bikini wax is the single most pressing issue facing womankind today - even those of us who've already learned their 38 new positions to pleasure our man.

Not surprisingly, women are treated as the uber-consumers we are, responsible for 80 percent of consumer spending. Now, I actually became happier (and saved about \$1,500 a year) when I decided to stop coloring my hair. My stylist only half joked, "Well that doesn't help me pay my rent." American women each spend an average of \$12,000 a year on **beauty products and salon grooming**; the beauty industry has a lot to lose if we all suddenly become happy with ourselves.

And, if we're still not happy, could it be that still earning 78 cents to a man's dollar makes some of us just a tad testy?

Even if the data supported Buckingham's theories, happiness itself isn't all it's cracked up to be. Certainly not when we seek it for its own sake. Rather, happiness comes from the satisfaction of working toward something larger than oneself, accomplishing things we're told can't be done. Where would a new idea come from if we were all just living in our own bliss? It's the sand in the oyster that creates the pearl.

Social justice revolutions arise from people who have tasted just enough of a better life to know they want more. And it's a sure bet that women seeking a more just society would be deemed among the unhappy by those content with the status quo.

And, just as surely, says Rivers, "No matter how many times the myth of the miserable woman is stomped, tromped and hacked to pieces by facts and figures, it always arises, like the Phoenix, from its own ashes. It's just too sexy for the media to ignore."