

FUTURE STUDIES*

[Entry by Ivana Milojević, 2000, *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Women: Global Women's Issues and Knowledge*, pp.894-895]

Future studies – the systematic study of the preferred, possible and probable versions of the future – is a relatively new field. In its modern history it has moved from being focused on utopianism to making empirical predictions. Currently, futures studies in government and business is dominated by strategic planning, technology impact assessment and risk analysis. In academia, following the social sciences in general, futures studies has taken a more critical perspective, focused less on what the future will be like, or even on the range of alternative futures, to what is missing in particular visions of the future. The quest for a more balanced study of the future is being driven by futurists who are far less committed to corporatist and scientific interests and far more sympathetic to multicultural concerns as to who is likely to be excluded if a certain future comes about. There is thus a slow but significant shift toward future studies as a management tool to control the future to future studies as a framework for social emancipation.

Still, future studies remains largely male dominated in terms of practitioners and in terms of the epistemological assumptions that underlie theory, methodology and content. Women remain excluded from both the history and the future of the future. At the same time, the evidence of women's one-time importance when it comes to understanding and creating the future can be easily found in the realm of old and long memories, for example, as expressed in Slav, Greek, Roman, Nordic, Saxon and Indian mythology. In most archaic traditions, one of the important functions of a goddess was the deciding men's fates. In Slav tradition, *sudjenice* are three women in charge of deciding everyone's personal destiny. One of the rare deities, and possibly the only deity, specifically in charge of the future was in fact not a male deity but a female deity, *Skuld*, one of the *Norns* from the Nordic tradition.

Even during the times when patriarchy was at its peak, there were always individual women who challenged prescribed gender relationships and gender roles. But in most societies, men have been in charge of controlling the public future and women have had little say about it. Women's encounter with the future was confined to better care for future generations and present households.

Elise Boulding, a peace theorist and futurist, explains this ambiguity – that is, women simultaneously being and not being "in charge" of the future. According to Boulding, one important historical role of women was as conservers of resources and as nurturers to fend off "the effects of change as much as possible in order to preserve a space of tranquility for those in their care". At the same time, "every woman with responsibility for a household is a practicing futurist," and women have always been the "womb of the future in every society" (Boulding, 1983: 9).

The appearance of the feminist movement was crucial in redefining what issues are "important" and "global". The feminist dictum that the personal is political gave women long needed legitimization to bring what they considered extremely important to the discussion about the creation of the future. The old and traditional women's activities directed towards influencing the future (for example, through the roles of witches or fates), which were primarily local, personal, family- and community-oriented, got legitimization to be brought to the societal level. Even more important, the legitimization of "women's issues" has created the possibility for many women futurists to write about both local and (redefined) global directions for the future.

Many women futurists have envisioned radically different future societies and suggested feminist alternatives to patriarchy. As a movement for social change, feminism is concerned with offering alternative visions of the future. Women futurists concentrate particularly on the study of the future in order to both redefine the present and articulate an alternative vision.

Women's Visions

Women's visions of the future are usually somewhat different from those of men. While both genders are concerned with the betterment of humankind in the future, most men tend to concentrate on "grand" historical analyses and issues, concentrating especially on realist discussions of emerging political powers as well as on new technologies. The predominance of power-oriented forecasting is evidenced by the focus on nation-oriented "Year 2000" or "Year 2020" studies (strategic in orientation) and the predominance of technological forecasting is evident in the images of the future that are circulated - for example, production of babies in factories and other types of mediation of human relationships through genetic and other new technologies. The methodologies used still rely heavily on "expert" opinion and on development of powerful mathematics "formulas" to forecast and develop accurate trend analysis. Most women futurists do not reject new technologies, nor do they refuse to acknowledge the obvious impact of technology on the lives of present and future generations. But the focus is often rather on human relationships and is more inclusive of the perspective of the powerless.

In terms of methodology, trend analysis is not a preferred method of future studies, as many trends are quite discouraging for the future of women or the speed of change is extremely slow. While this method is useful in revealing the likely future if current trends do not change, it offers no alternatives. On the other hand, methods such as visioning, in which preferred futures are articulated, and backcasting, in which the preferable future is developed and then the path toward it is "remembered", are more relevant for women, and other similarly disadvantaged members of (global) society.

Visions of future societies are developed everywhere, but those developed in the West are the best known and most influential. Examples include the "win-win world" in which the escape route from the prison of gender as well as economism is through the path of cooperation, community and caring (Hazel Henderson 1996); the "gentle (androgynous) society" (Boulding 1977); and the "partnership society (gylany)" (Eisler, 1996). In South

Asia, Nandini Joshi envisions the future of the world community "not in the huge, crowded, cumbersome, crime-threatened cities, overridden with unemployment and inflation" but in "lustrous, flourishing, free villages overflowing with useful goods, professions, intelligence and arts" (Joshi, 1992, 935). Many other women as well imagine preferable futures, for example, through feminist fiction and through global grassroots movements. These preferable futures are usually along the lines of decentralized, non-hierarchical, ecologically and economically sustainable societies where communal life, family life, parenting and education are highly valued, institutions are human-scaled and diversity is celebrated.

Futurists also develop scenarios for the future. Scenarios are useful in that they can empower individuals and communities, as a range of preferable futures can be chosen and actions developed in order to achieve them. They are also important because they articulate futures that can help women develop strategies to try to avoid certain futures or at least diminish their impact. Scenarios also distance us from the present, creating alternative futures that contest traditional gender roles.

Scenarios for women's futures usually include (1) continued female-male polarity (in the form of male backlash, continued growth/patriarchy, or status quo) (2) (lesbian) separatism and (3) partnership or a golden age of equality (imagined in the form of unisex androgyny or in the form of multiple gender diversities). In the "continued female-male polarity" scenario, gender is fixed and there is little escape from socially constructed gender roles. Societies either stay the same, with patriarchy changing only form and not substance; or the patriarchy increases, either through slow growth or dramatically in the form of male backlash against recent women's gains in the society. Women's separatism is one response to such futures, as women form women only groupings. The "partnership" scenario imagines societies where there is equal cooperation of genders, where women increasingly adopt virtues traditionally seen as masculine and vice versa, or where gender becomes even more fluid and essentialist categories such as "man" or "woman" abandoned altogether.

No matter which scenario dominates, it is imperative that women continue to address the future in public, private, and epistemological spaces.

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* NB: While the original text written by Ivana Milojević used the term 'futures studies' this was changed by the editors of the Encyclopedia to 'future studies'