

# Futures Research QUARTERLY

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# FEMINIST CRITIQUES AND VISIONS OF THE FUTURE

by

Ivana Milojevic and Sohail Inayatullah

## CURRENT TRENDS

One does not need to be an expert to realize that wherever we look, either into our past or into our present, either within our local community or around the world, one fact remains almost universal: society always treats its women worse than it treats its men.

If current trends continue, women will continue to suffer from violence, poverty, malnutrition, legal and economical disadvantages well into the 21st century. Women will continue to face more difficulties than men in many areas of life, mostly because our societies are still controlled by men and male values. The crucial spheres for "controlling" the future, politics, as well as most institutional and personal decision-making processes, will remain out of women's reach. According to the United Nations' future projections, women's position will improve a bit, but even in the year 2200, women will be far from reaching gender equality.<sup>1</sup> According to these projections, the percentage of world income received by women will increase from current 10% to 20% in the year 2025, and then further to 40% in the year 2200. The percentage of world property owned by women will increase from the "huge" 1% as it is today, to 3% in year 2025, and 20% in year 2200. In the year 2025, women will still outnumber men as poor (60%), illiterate (55%), refugees (70%), and sick (57%).<sup>2</sup> Women can hope to still outlive men, as female life expectancy continues to be higher than male's, although this is not because of our social and "human" efforts to help the disadvantaged, but in spite of them.

However, not all forecasts are pessimistic. The American optimism of Aburdene and Naisbitt leads them to forecast a much better future for women. In their *Megatrends for Women* they conclude that we will reach a "partnership society", fifty years from now, wherein "that ideal is realized in the developed world and actualizing in much of the developing world."<sup>3</sup> Before then, not only will there be a woman president in the USA (at the latest in ten years time), but women are changing the world in such a way that the "New World Order is also a 'New Order of Women'."<sup>4</sup> In this new world, professional women

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will become role models for young women (instead of media stars and fashion models), and, in general, women will continue to assume leadership roles, transforming business, politics, health, religion and spirituality. The "Goddess is awakened" and "the balance has finally tipped in women's favor," say the authors. While Aburdene and Naisbitt are certainly right in their claim that women's position in most developed societies has significantly improved, more realistic prognoses, especially those who have in mind the world as a whole, would be extremely cautious in predicting such radical changes in a relatively short time frame (50 years).

### Futures Studies

Although men and women have always had thoughts about the future, future studies—the systematic study of preferred, possible and probable alternative futures—is a relatively new field.<sup>5</sup> Since most futurists gained their academic training from other disciplines, futures studies is firmly connected with other contemporary social sciences, with their dominant theories and methodologies, and their general framework of knowledge. Therefore, it is to be expected that the field of future studies is burdened with a male-centered bias. For millennia, men have been in charge of controlling the future so it is not surprising that they are seen as creators of everything that is "new," radically different and progressive. Just one look at the futures studies field can make us conclude that "the only relevant futurists in the world are a handful of old white American men."<sup>6</sup> There is also a general assumption in most societies that thinking about the future is not to be found within women's domain. In general, women are traditionally perceived as conservers, while men as those leaning forward. This is well illustrated in widely accepted symbolic language, precisely in the symbolic representation of women and men. If we examine the male symbol we notice that its main characteristic is a pointed arrow, aiming towards the upright direction, which is also how we draw trends and movements toward the future on diagrams. On the other hand, the female symbol is represented with the circle and cross firmly rooted to the ground.

Elise Boulding explains the lack of women authors in her futures library by the fact that the "creative imagining work of women does not easily fit into the mold of the professional futurist" and that "women are more likely to encounter it in science fiction than in the 'serious' work of spelling our futures."<sup>7</sup> For Boulding, this is nothing else than "nonsense," because "every woman with responsibility for a household is a practicing futurist."<sup>8</sup> This is, of course, true, not just for women but for every human being, and precisely this ability to think about the future is one of the most distinctive characteristics of our species. But there is one very important fact which divides women and men when it comes to the future. The future most women envision is quite *different* from the future envisioned by, if

not all men, at least their most powerful members. Frankly, it would be difficult to imagine societies run by women where the main effort would be in the "destroying lives industry." Or societies in which women would consider themselves so utterly above nature that its destruction would not be connected with the destruction of our species and its future generations. Men's appropriation of technology and its development from the male perspective has led to a general belief that all our problems can be resolved by it. Our most pronounced imaging of the future is still obsessed with technological forecasting, as it can be, for example, seen in science fiction. Men's "colonization of the future" brings into our mind images the production of babies in factories; men driving spacemobiles and spaceships with women on passengers seats; the destruction of Gaia's tissue and its replacement with man-made ones; an artificial ozone layer; artificial limbs, organs and even artificial brains; war games with even more powerful weapons and ever more powerful enemies; conquest of the old and new (aliens, cyborgs, clones, mutants or androgynes); and the further degradation of women by their cyber-exploitation, cyberpornography and the creation of submissive women roles in virtual reality.

### Colonizing Epistemologies

Male colonization of the future also includes futures methodologies and epistemologies.<sup>9</sup> Patricia Huckle, for example, stresses that much of future research methodologies is controlled by men and male viewpoints.<sup>10</sup> She points out the male style in the use of "experts" and the way problems are chosen in methods like the Delphi technique or in scenario development. Women would not choose experts but would prefer small groups, working together in an egalitarian environment to solve agreed upon problems. She further claims that not only methods closer to "science fiction" (science-fiction writing is, as she points out, also quite different when writing from a feminist perspective) represent the male point of view, but that trend extrapolation, cross-impact matrices, quantifiable data for identifying alternative futures, simulation modeling, simulation gaming and technological forecasting also "suffer from the limits of available data and ideological assumptions." The questions asked, the statistics collected, the larger framework of knowledge remain technocratic, oblivious to feminist epistemologies and to issues central to women.

In addition, a basic assumption of futures studies, that future outcomes can be influenced by individual choices and that individuals are solely responsible for the future is problematic from a feminist perspective.<sup>11</sup> While individuals having choice is certainly true at one level, this assumption must be put into a social context, reinforced with the concept of power and the availability of the choices. Otherwise it represents the typical Western and male way of looking at those impoverished women bounded by tradition, family, society,

economy or politics. In its bare form, it further assumes a position of power, stability, democratic and a moderately rich environment. Unfortunately, for the vast majority of people, the future does just happen to them.

There is also one very specific area in which many feminists see the most danger in having male-dominated future's research and that is the area of controlled reproduction.<sup>12</sup> Man has been trying to control and dominate women's participation in procreation at least since the beginning of the patriarchy, and current developments in medical science might enable them to gain almost complete control over human reproduction. This would totally marginalize women, as they would be entirely removed from the reproductive biological cycle. Feminists argue that in this crucial area of the future of humanity and human evolution, women's approaches are of extreme importance. This is so not only because these are women's bodies and genes involved, but also because women have been largely responsible for human reproduction from the beginning of our species' existence. Women's identities have become to a large extent based on this biological history. Of course, cutting this responsibility could be seen by some as liberating for women's destinies (by escaping childbirth and possibly childrearing), but what is worrisome is that it could further decrease woman's say in what would be our common future. Certainly rapid developments in genetics are occurring without women's voices. Intrinsic to science is male ideology. For example, Bonnie Spanier argues in her *IM/Partial Science: Gender Ideology in Molecular Biology*<sup>13</sup> that even nongendered bacteria are described in gendered terms, often reinscribing dominant/subordinate relationships. Even the building blocks of life (and they are being transformed by new technologies) are not immune from sexual ideology.

The most recent "developments" in cloning have enabled reproduction without one gender (for species where reproduction has traditionally required both genders). In this instance, in the case of first officially recorded cloning of mammals, the redundant gender was male. But with the exception of two sheep (Dolly, the clone and the child of an adult female sheep) almost everyone else involved in a process was male. The very essence of cloning represents an achievement within the dominant scientific paradigm, one dominated by men's worldview.<sup>14</sup> What is remarkable is that while this paradigm is fundamentally based on control, domination and experimentation with nature and which results in millions of animals tortured and slaughtered, hundreds of thousands (or maybe more) fertilized cells and embryos destroyed, the only ethical question raised was: shall we clone humans too?

While medical science still needs women (their bodies, ovaries and uteruses), it is not very interested in women's say about meanings and consequences of their research. With the creation of an artifi-



cial womb, which is probably just a question of time, women's role in reproduction will be decreased even more.

Furthermore, the new virtual reality technologies promise to further the objectification of women. Women's images and selves are being created and valorized in the mind's of adolescent net surfers. While the net allows women to play with their gender identities and possibly gives them many new opportunities, but is—with the male-design of the net—a place for the gathering of sexual harassers and pedophiles.

Thus, the future portends a world where women will no longer be needed at all, creating the womenless real world and a women-filled virtual world.

Unfortunately, it is not only medicine and biology where women do not have control over the research agenda. Women's participation in science in general is still very limited, and so it is in the futures field. However, this does not have to be so. Futurist Eleonora Masini argues that women can create alternatives for the future better than men because of certain individual (flexibility, rapid response to emergency situations, superimposition of tasks, definite priorities and adaptability) and social capacities (solidarity, exchange, overcoming of barriers). She also shows the impressive range of women's activities in many social movements such as the peace, human rights and ecological movements. These activities will influence the future, less in terms of obvious revolution and more in terms of "an important, slow historical process of change",<sup>15</sup> in creating a global civil society.

Feminist visionaries are also making an important contribution in making alternative ways of living and thinking, in describing the transition into this new era. But perhaps the most important contribution to thinking about the future is in feminist utopias. These utopias are both critiques of the present and visions of alternative futures. They contest traditional strategic planning notions of creating the future, since one cannot get to there from here—the framework for planning has to be changed. First, we have to imagine a different world.

## FEMINIST UTOPIAS

As obvious from current trends it would take many hundreds, if not thousands of years to achieve most feminist goals. That is why some feminist authors like to "escape" into the utopia where boundaries are limited only by our ability to imagine new and radically different. Utopias can give us a higher sense of freedom, possibility and optimism. In general, people's optimism tends to increase with the time frame of their prognoses. What is perceived as unreasonable to expect tomorrow, or next year, might happen in five or ten, or fifty years, because "anything can happen in that time."

A common factor in feminist fiction is the questioning of current gender relationships by, for example, imagining the world in which there is more balanced distribution of power among genders. Some feminist fiction writers imagine a world dominated by women, or societies in which there is strict division by gender (women and men living separately), and further contemplate the consequences of such social organization. Others describe a world in which women's subordination is brought to the extreme, societies in which women have hardly any rights in male-dominated societies, where they can be "kept" for sole purpose of procreation or for satisfying men's sexual desires. These dystopias represent social commentary rather than a real vision, and definitely not a desirable future for women. Apart from questioning gender relationships, there are some other common places in most feminist novels.

As envisioned, future societies tend to live in "peace" with nature, having some sort of sustainable growth. They are, in general, less violent than the present ones. Families almost never take a nuclear form but are more extended (often include relatives and friends). Communal life is highly valued and societies are rarely totalitarian. Oppressive and omnipotent governmental and bureaucratic control are usually absent while imagined societies tend to be either "anarchical" or with a communal management. The division of private and public sphere is also commonly challenged, by, for example, patterning society after the family, or by more fluid social roles, higher involvement and greater intersections between those two areas.

The present low status of women's work is also often criticized and some traditionally "feminine" occupations are revalued and reexamined. In most feminist utopias, education and motherhood are, therefore, extremely respected, sometimes being the main purpose for the existence of the utopian societies. The majority of feminist fiction writers explore not only the way humans act and behave, but also concentrate on the meanings attached to them and how people feel about them. Writers influenced by postmodernism focus on the disclosure of gender power relations as embodied in language, while others mostly focus on social and reproductive relations.<sup>16</sup> Of course, as there are many different positions in feminism, there would be many different images of desirable future societies.

The consequence is that gender relationships can be imagined in many different and radically new ways. While most traditional utopias tried to imagine future society which would be organized with accordance to human nature, often locking women into their "natural" roles and functions, contemporary feminist utopianism questions not only dominant sexual ideology but gender itself. The other main difference between fictions written from feminist perspective and those based on traditional notions about gender is that women are not pushed into ghettos and examined as one of many

topics. In feminist writings, women are everywhere, being portrayed as "speakers, knowers, and bearers of the fable."<sup>17</sup>

The most important aspect of feminist fiction novels is in message that alternatives to the patriarchy can exist and "that these alternatives can be as 'real' as our reality."<sup>18</sup> They provide a variety of options instead of having only one, universal and rigid solution for the most important social institutions and activities, such as education, marriage, parenting, health, defense, government, reproduction and sexuality, division of labor and the work people do.

In many ways, feminist visioning corresponds with women's reality, with life and work of unknown women of the world (which often tends to be local, sustainable, concerned with peace, growth, nurturing, service, helping others, and is children and less-abled centered), but is at the same time trying to question myths about women's "natural" roles and activities. Its main function is to break and transform patriarchal social and cultural practices. It is extremely important to stress that feminists are very careful not to engage in a creation of definite, clear and rigid image of what our societies are supposed to look like. Most feminists are aware that no "perfect" society can be created, especially not based on ideas coming from the past. As Ashis Nandy notes "today's utopias are tomorrow's nightmares."<sup>19</sup> Most feminists are, indeed, aware that any rigid imaging could bring future societies in which gender relations might be "equal" but societies would definitely be totalitarian and absolutist. Lucy Sargisson claims that feminist utopias are in particular critical of approaches which emphasize perfection and the ideas that utopias constitute blueprints for the perfect polity.<sup>20</sup> Rather, they are spaces for speculation, subversion and critique, "social dreaming", intellectual expansion of possible futures, and expression of a desire for different (and better) ways of being. Sargisson further points out that it is often common to find in contemporary feminist utopian literature and theory description of several worlds, sometimes contrasting, none perfect. These worlds, then, play rather speculative, meditative or critical roles rather than as instructions as to how to create a perfect world. The search for perfection, as women know well, is often at the cost of the most vulnerable in society. In this light, further described images, by two women futurists should be read: Boulding's vision of "gentle" and Eisler's vision of "partnership" society. They are both critics of present gender relations and they attempt to envision better (not best) worlds in the future.

### **Boulding's and Eisler's visions of the future of gender and society**

Elise Boulding, peace activist and theorist, feminist and futurist, at several places articulates an image of the "gentle society" which would be situated within decentralist (and demilitarized) but yet still interconnected and interdependent worlds. While at the moment women are currently the "fifth world" (poorest of the poor) and are



now and in history usually invisible, as the "underside", she believes that we are increasingly moving toward some sort of androgynous society, which Boulding alternatively calls "the gentle society". Elise Boulding imagines this society as an exciting and diverse place in which "each human being would reach a degree of individuation and creativity such as only a few achieve in our present society."<sup>21</sup> Future androgynous humans might have a fluid definition of what constitutes gender but that is not the main issue; rather the issue will be whether:

by institutionalizing opportunities for the education, training, and participation of women in every sector of society at every level of decision-making in every dimension of human activity, and extending to men the procreation-oriented education we now direct exclusively to women, we will set in motion a dialogic teaching-learning process between women and men that will enhance the human potentials of both.<sup>22</sup>

The creators of the gentle society will be androgynous human beings (she brings examples from history in the images of Jesus, Buddha and Shiva), people who combine qualities of gentleness and assertiveness in ways that fits neither typical male nor female roles. The coming of the gentle society will, according to Boulding, happen through three main leverage points: family, early-childhood school setting (nursery school and early elementary school) and through community.

Education will be very important, and much different than it is today. The role of the children in the society should be, in general, much more important, as children should not be secluded, the way they are today. Rather they would be spending time with adults and we would be able to find children even in government bodies. Every person in society should have some role in education of the young ones instead of transferring responsibility only to "official" teachers. A fourth leverage point will be the domain of contemporary declarations and covenants about human rights. The transition towards the future society has to be peaceful because no violent revolution can lead to the creation of the gentle society. Boulding believes that both women fiction writers and "ordinary" women imagine and work in a direction of creating a more localist society, where technology would be used in a sophisticated and careful way to ensure humanized, interactive, nurturant and nonbureaucratic societies. Through women's triple role of breeder-feeder-producer women can bring radically different imaging and are therefore crucial for the creation of more sustainable and peaceful world.

Riane Eisler, macrohistorian, futurist and feminist, has articulated her vision about the partnership society in two influential books: *The*

*Chalice and the Blade* and *Sacred Pleasure*. Eisler claims that throughout human history two basic models for social and ideological organization have existed. She names those two models as androcracy (dominator model) and gylany (partnership model). According to Eisler, the partnership model has existed in some prehistoric societies until it got swept by androcratic and patriarchal societies. Androcracy has been the dominating model for millennia but our era is characterized by a renewal of partnership wherein a strong movement towards more balanced types of social organization already exist (most notably in the Scandinavian world). For Eisler, in this nuclear/electronic/biochemical age, transformation towards partnership society is absolutely crucial for the survival of our species.

In gylany, linking instead of ranking is the primary organizational principle. Here "neither half of humanity is permanently ranked over the other, with both genders tending to be valued equally. The distinctive feature of this model is a way of structuring human relations—be they of men and women, or of different races, religions, and nations—in which diversity is not automatically equated with inferiority or superiority."<sup>23</sup> Androcratic societies have not only rigid male dominance, but also highly stratified, hierarchic and authoritarian system, as well as a high degree of institutionalized social violence, ranging from child and wife beating to chronic warfare. Since any society is going to have some violence, what distinguishes the partnership model from androcracy is lack of institutionalization and idealization of violence (the main purpose of which is to maintain rigid rankings of domination), and lack of stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. On the other hand:

in societies that closely approximate the partnership or gylanic model, we find a very different core configuration: a more equal partnership between women and men in both the so-called private and public spheres, a more generally democratic political and economic structure, and (since it is not required to maintain rigid rankings of domination) abuse and violence is here neither idealized nor institutionalized. Moreover, here stereotypically "feminine" values can be fully integrated into the operational system of social guidance.<sup>24</sup>

Traditional partnership societies were neither ideal nor violence-free, but they were developing in a more peaceful and socially and ecologically balanced way and had, in general, a more egalitarian social structure. Today, due to many technological inventions, we, as a species, possess technologies as powerful as the processes of nature, continues Eisler. Since this is happening within the dominator cultural cognitive maps, humans have the ability to destroy all life on this planet. The realization of this fact "has fueled an intensifying

movement to complete the shift from a dominator to a partnership model."<sup>25</sup> This transition will not be easy as the forces of the androcracy are, and will continue, fighting back. However, only by accepting a partnership cognitive cultural map can we realize our unique human potentials. This cannot happen until relations between the female and male halves of humanity become more balanced. The alternative is, of course, dominator cognitive cultural map which will, "at our level of technological development lead to the human extinction phase, the end of our adventure on this Earth."<sup>26</sup>

While some critics argue that Eisler's work is overly simplistic, its importance is not its empirical precision but in its ability to reread history and create the possibility of an alternative future—it gives new assets to women and men.<sup>27</sup> Unlike postmodern writers, Eisler eschews detached irony, focusing instead on recovering an idealized past from a male present and future.

### Conclusion: A Different Future

When conceptualizing the future of gender relationships, we need, however, to be aware that the gender might be constructed dramatically differently in the future. Feminists in their own ways are beginning to rethink the role of women by remembering historic myths (matriarchy, a cooperative golden era) but also by destabilizing categories like "women" and "men", categories which were for millennia have been seen as fixed, natural, and in no way to be problematized. This turn to postmodern futures, while important in undoing essentialist perspectives on gender, should not become an escape into virtual reality where the day to day sufferings of women throughout the planet is forgotten.

Most futurists agree that the future is not predetermined, at least in a sense that there is always some place left for human agency. However, feminist futurists are quick to point out that there is structural inequity in the world. Our visions of the future often reinscribe that inequity. Trend analysis, while letting us know the painful truth of women's suffering if current conditions continue, does not open up the future. Feminist utopian thinking, particularly the works of Boulding and Eisler, provide not only a new vision of the future but a critique of the present. The future is important to all of us—the more women participate in understanding and creating alternative futures, the more enriched men and women will be.

### NOTES

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20. Sargisson. 1996.

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27. See, for example, Kathy Ferguson. *The Man Question*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. In response, see Sohail Inayatullah. "Macrohistory and Social Transformation Theory: The Contribution of Riane Eisler," *World Futures*, forthcoming, 1998.