

## Introduction

# Futures of feminism

It has been 18 years since *Futures* had a special issue on ‘Gender and Change’ [1]. Magda Cordell McHale, who edited that 1989 special issues, and Peggy Choong, summarised the rationale in the following words:

As we approach the end of the 20th century we seem to be fraught with self-doubts and burdened with unmanaged problems. ...The kind of severe disruption and social transformation we are experiencing in this decade seems to suggest that we are coming to the end of an old period and are in the throes of a new era...Clearly, the crises we face today call for a different approach. The principles of ‘masculinity’ have shown themselves to be limited and deficient. A softer, more caring attitude is required... This new approach, the gender partnership...is an approach that recognizes the quality and values of the entire human race... [2].

Eighteen years on, the changes have increased in number and magnitude, but in some ways, and in regard to gender issues, ‘the more things changed the more they stayed the same’. The above theme—of current crisis, the emergence of a new phase, and the potential for this new phase to be qualitatively and positively different—has been a constant in both futures and feminist literature. But not only have very few feminist visions—qualitatively and positively different futures—been realised over the last two decades, we have also witnessed an increase in the patriarchal ‘backlash’ against some of the gains that feminist/women’s movements have achieved. Furthermore, it seems some areas of western society and some areas of knowledge have come out of the cycle of feminist insurgence and subsequent backlash without a scratch. Is the futures field one of those areas?

Instead of engaging in this debate, the editors would like to invite our respected readers to perhaps reflect on the questions below. In a personal, individual sense, these specific questions address the broader issue of how far feminist theory and thinking has become woven into the futures field.

On what basis are the arguments for the distinctiveness of ‘women’s ways of knowing’ made?

From the top of your head, could you name 10 feminist authors or texts in your area of interest/research? What are the elements of ‘feminist core’—of beliefs, values, methodological and epistemological positions, visions?

On what basis has this core been challenged over the last couple of decades, and by whom?

What are women’s/feminists preferable futures visions, as articulated by women’s movements or by prominent women futurists?

What are the common themes in feminist utopian and science fiction?

What are some of the main trends/locally and globally that are currently impacting women the most, both in negative and positive terms?

As has been the case in regard to the other passionate debates within our societies, the field of gendered inquiry has too often been described as some sort of a battlefield, in which it is:

women against men  
feminists against men

feminists versus ‘ordinary’ women  
 older generation of feminist versus younger women  
 white/middle class/heterosexual/able bodied women versus other marginalised women  
 western feminists versus the rest of the world  
 liberal feminists versus radical feminists  
 cyber feminists versus spiritual eco feminists, and so on....

We believe this is a problem. Such discourse prevents people from hearing what feminism is really about and what it can offer to the field of future studies. For example, the previously mentioned perceived divisions highlighted in the popular media significantly (and negatively) impact on the work in the area of feminist futures. In the workshops where issues of gender and the future are simultaneously raised, it is our experience that three questions/comments most commonly emerge, especially any time that a positive vision based on a feminist epistemological and methodological framework is provided:

- These authors of the literature (and writings by feminists that forms a backbone of a proposed vision or visions) all wrote in the 1980s. Their statements, arguments and ideas are no longer relevant. Feminist visions are outdated.
- Women have achieved most of those goals. Just go and ask young women!
- What about men and boys?

The first comment is particularly interesting as the legitimacy of thinkers from other traditions does not automatically become discredited with the passage of time. Consider western classics, for example those that engaged with the utopian thinking, such as Plato, More, Rousseau, Wells, Orwell, Huxley and so on. So, could it be that it is authors associated with particular social movements, and not women in particular, that are prone to be quickly discredited, especially when the movement itself may be questioned? Then again, consider the on-going legacy of thinkers such as Marx, Bloch, Marcuse, and other authors associated with socialist movements. One could make the argument that the *gravitas*, quality and influence of those such as Plato, More et al. cannot, or should not, be compared with the input of feminists and feminist movement. Or that, given the (at least desired) collective enterprise that feminism has largely been, it cannot possibly exist in the same realm with the others, for example, with the realm of individual authors or those social movements with strong individual leaders. But, of course, this raises the question of who decides what quality is and what is to be counted as influence. So instead of discrediting feminist vision as outdated, a more useful approach would recognise feminism as a significant force that had a history and has a future.

Likewise, that different genders and different age groups face different issues has always been the point highlighted in feminist writings. This includes the fact that younger generations of women do enjoy privileges not available to previous generations and thus may not see the need for feminism in that particular phase of their lives. That, in itself, is part of a desired vision proposed by feminists themselves—women and girls not having additional obstacles related to their gender—and could be seen as one signifier for the success of feminism. If that indeed is the case, the analysis of how this major social change came about, what the visions were, and what the ‘pulls’ of the future were that informed such change, is essential. At the same time, this perception by some young women may or may not change, once they create their own families or once some of those gains made by feminism diminish. Unfortunately, there is quite a bit of evidence, some provided in the Conversation paper in this issue, that many of these earlier gains are under threat, globally. Thus, we argue that the need for feminism remains, with or without young women’s recognition that it is relevant to their present lives.

It is also important to stress here, and particularly in relation to the last ‘what about boys and men’ comment, that there are many feminism(s) rather than one unified front of disenchanted women who are out there to get some sort of revenge, or to figure out how to dominate men. In fact, the latest interpretation of feminism has very little to do with any of the feminisms at all—but has been heavily popularised in media, with statements by prominent feminists taken out of context, highlighted and sometimes even twisted. Sure, there were some extreme sentiments aired by some feminists, especially in early stages of the western feminist

second wave—but that was in a context too: as a reaction to an extreme gender inequity that has existed (and still exists) within most patriarchal societies. Still, as the introduction by Rosemarie Putnam Tong to *Feminist Thought* (1998) [3] identifies, there are at least eight distinctive positions within feminism. They range from older liberal, radical and Marxist/social feminist to the more recent, psychoanalytic/gender, existentialist, postmodern, multicultural/global and eco feminist perspectives. In addition, at least three more perspectives can be included here as completely distinct rather than being discussed within the previous positions—for example, lesbian, cyber and spiritual feminism.

But despite all this diversity it is possible to identify the core of feminist visioning for the future, one that makes them significantly different and unique. One of the most crucial signifiers here, of course, is the awareness that gender *issues* are important for the future, or at least, that they *could be*. Other elements of this common core have been identified elsewhere [4] and what will suffice to say here is that ‘domination of women/girls over men/boys’ is critically absent from this core. As summarised by Cynthia Wagner, editor of special issue of *The Futurist* in 1997 on “What Women Want”: “not one of the scenarios we received describes a ‘preferred’ future that exclude men or in which men are subservient to women. The preferred future for women, however it turns out, must be one that benefits all of humanity—even men” [5].

So the ‘what about men and boys’ question is not counter-indicative with feminism, rather, it was the discovery of gender by feminists that enabled such questions to be asked at the first place. But, unfortunately, this question also often implies that it is men and boys rather than women and girls who are currently being disadvantaged, and that, again, feminism has either run its course, or even created this alleged male disadvantage. This perception is problematic for many reasons, and some of the authors in the Conservation piece did provide arguments why this is so. In addition, rather than positioning these two genders against each other, a more useful lens for the 21st century and beyond is the one that asks what the specific issues are (including issues of privilege and disadvantage) that are pertinent for various genders and gender identities.

All of the discussion above does not try to claim that there is a global conspiracy against feminism happening, but rather that these are some of the additional obstacles feminist authors and theorists are facing.

As a movement, feminism has contributed to major social and theoretical changes, across the globe. Feminist alternatives that reflected on and incorporated ‘women’s experiences, perspectives and ways of knowing’ have created a ripple effect that resulted in a dramatic paradigm shift [6] within our global society. At the same time, this social change has been uneven, cyclical and sometimes only temporary. Like capitalism, colonialism and racism, patriarchy has shown to be incredibly resilient system of organising human affairs, equally being able to renew, transform and quickly respond to the changing conditions that may undermine some of its basic rationales for being. This patriarchy—a widespread social system of gender dominance—has been very successfully doing, since it first came into being. One of the ways it has exercised power is through discrediting of women’s and feminist priorities and preferred futures—by, for example, labelling these visions ‘utopian’, irrelevant, bound to fail, naïve, unrealistic or even ‘outdated’.

Returning to the first of the issues frequently raised in futures workshops, we would like to stress that there is a reason, however, why one might want to focus on the 1980s when looking into alternatives proposed by feminist and women’s movements. This era, as discussed by Ivana Milojević in her contribution to this issue, ‘Timing feminism, feminising time’, has been the Golden Age of feminist visioning. This Golden Age belongs to the second wave of feminism in the west: beginning around the 1960s and culminating in the 1980s. Initially, the feminist movement was predominantly about equal access of women to the existing social institutions. Following from this ‘liberal’ phase, ‘radical’ feminists started to focus more on the critique of existing social institutions, as being the embodiment of patriarchy and masculinity, and demanding that parallel institutions be created to better respond to ‘women’s’ ways of knowing, experiences and so on. Responding to these demands, theorists and activists alike started to devise a whole range of alternative ways of thinking, being and doing, that were apparently closer to how ‘women’ would run a society, if given the chance. Some of these alternatives were influenced by discourses on early (matrilinear) societies, others by parallel social movements (e.g. ecological, peace, ‘hippy’ movements). In both cases they culminated approximately two decades ago.

Once at its strongest, the feminist movement started to crumble from the inside out. Constant pressures from outside probably did not help either, but what has made it increasingly difficult to talk about ‘women’s’ or even feminist’s issues was the awareness about the in-group differences. Given the diversity among the

world's women, these in-group differences are obviously as big as, or even bigger, than differences between the two genders. Still, it gave us a lasting legacy of feminism, some of which is remembered in this issue. This legacy includes the discovery of the category of *gender*—as socially constructed differences between men and women and *patriarchy* as both a systemic social structure and system of thought.

Another legacy that feminism has provided is in terms of proposing alternatives for the future. The central idea here is about a preferred future: gender-balanced society. There are differences in terms of whether such society would, ideally, be: (1) androgynous, (2) polarised into two separate but equal (male and female) sexes, or (3) composed of the multiplicity of diverse genders. What is clear, however, is that the ranking of one sex/gender *over* the other, whether male over female or female over male is gone. Consequently, so is the ranking of some humans over others (i.e. that are racially, ethnically, ideologically, etc. different) as well as of humans over cyborgs, other species, and nature in general. In this respect, that young women and men/boys have different perspectives to older people and women in general is not an issue. An issue is how these differences are to be resolved in a way that does not privilege one gender over the other, and ideally, any social group (based on age, class, race and so on) over another.

Reflecting on this central idea, 18 years (since the earlier issue on Gender), 30 years (since the height of feminist second movement in the west) or 100 years on (since the hey day of western suffragettes' movement) we would now like to raise the following questions: Are we as close to this feminist ideal as we ever were? Or closer? Or further apart? Sure, women can vote, but is western democracy still relevant and working? Women can get education in higher institutions of learning, but what is the overall position of this sector today? Women can gain financial independence through employment, but what types of jobs are they going to occupy? Given the increase in expectation from employees, what kind of implications from women's employment are we seeing today, on women's lives, families, communities, health? What of poor women, who never in history had not worked, both inside and outside of their homes (if they had one)?

Have new information and communication technologies helped women in particular and humans in general? Is globalisation bringing us all together or separating us even further? What role does the global media play when it comes down to gender roles and expectations? How are global environmental issues and global war(s) going to impact on us all, and in which ways is this impact going to differ based on person's gender, class, nationality? What is the role of the/a current global future 'imaginaire'—whose views and visions dominate? Are these visions—preferable, plausible and most-likely futures—reflective of women's/feminist issues and priorities?

As can be seen from these questions above, the engagement of feminism with futures field remains crucial. Feminist/women's movements, and feminist ideology, theory and philosophy have so far produced a massive amount of scholarship, ideas, alternatives and visions for the future. It would be impossible for us to engage with all the above-mentioned questions here. Rather, in this special issue of *Futures* we provide a snippet of work that exists at the intersection of futures studies and feminist theory with five articles; an interview with 13 women futurists, and a book review. For very similar reasons to why the global knowledge production in general (and in English) comes from particular geographical and cultural space, majority of our contributors come from North America, Europe and Australia. Still, we believe that they do bring wide diversity of voices, experiences and ideas.

Bhavnani and Foran's paper draws together real examples of current alternatives to patriarchy, in widely differing contexts all over the globe. From the rubber tappers in the Amazon, to the revolutionaries in the Chiapas, the women caught in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the women of Gujarat struggling for economic opportunity, all of these women's movements show new forms of organisation developed to bring about change. They use these to illustrate a new paradigm for development: women, culture, development. The extraordinary cases they describe provide hope precisely because they are real and they work, the global palette they use only adds to the compelling story they tell.

Montgomery explores the changing context for the US family and how that may change the notion of families and parenting. She presents us with four societal scenarios based on different combinations of economic and cultural realities. In each of these the lives of the family are very different. Montgomery draws on feminist theory to explore the implications of the status of women, men and children, presenting also a spectrum of roles, relationships and the pressures upon them.

Gaede unpicks the concept of ‘values’ in her paper, and recasts the concept as an important part of consciousness. This is the central theoretical contribution against which she explores the impact of the women’s liberation movement on 12 women’s lives, using values-consciousness as an analytical framework. Her use of many of the women’s own words takes this theoretical work down to the reality of individuals’ lives and choices. As she convincingly argues, her work has important implications for futures thinking.

Hurley’s article analyses contemporary film images of the future from an eco-feminist perspective. She highlights film-makers fascination with images of bleak futures, and their tendency to repeat the same values and perspectives again and again. Her paper, an exemplar in the use of Causal Layered Analysis, vividly brings to our attention the domination of our images of the future by dystopia and patriarchy. Hurley argues strongly that without our acknowledgement that this is the case, then we will not be stimulated to envision and develop alternatives. Karen’s work is an important step in pluralising our visions of the future.

Milojević takes us from a discussion of feminist thinking in futures studies to an exploration of the implications of the domination of one of the fundamentals of futures thinking: our approach to time. She analyses the patriarchal approach to time and how it has excluded other perspectives on time, including women’s time. Milojević brings to our attention the idea of women’s time and carefully shows how women’s time allow women’s ways of knowing to come to the fore. This is a key issue in the discussion of women’s and feminist’s contribution to futures works. She raises vital questions such as what happens when time is theorized on female subjectivity? What female experiences can be used to re-theorize and de-colonise patriarchal time? And, can women’s time be used to support a new eco paradigm with its hopes for our long-term survival?

Our conversation with women futurists, woven together by Karen Hurley, addresses a series of important questions about the futures of feminism, and feminism in futures studies. It shows a wealth of thinking and experiences from around the world. Current trends are described, along with contributors’ analyses, concerns and hopes. It began a process we would all have liked to continue. The idea of many voices sharing space and facing the same issues, was very much consonant with the inclusive values we are keen to expound.

Ivana’s review of Morrison’s biography of Elise Boulding, brings us a useful and interesting glimpse of Boulding’s important contributions to feminist and futures thinking; and brings to our attention a valuable, readable, new book exploring her life and work.

It is our belief that the futures field can gain enormously if it embraces feminist thought and likewise feminism can benefit greatly from engaging with futures theory and methodology. Of course, this engagement of ‘women’ and ‘futures’ has already been attempted by both futures (i.e. “What Women Want”, special issue of *The Futurist*, May-June 1997; “Women and the Future”, special issue of *The Manoa Journal of Friend and Half-Fried Ideas (about the future...)*, January 1994; “Gender and Change”, special issue of *FUTURES*, 1989) and women’s studies journals (“Women in Futures Research”, special issue of *Women’s Studies International Quarterly*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1981). And, of course, many future theorists and practitioners continue to engage with issue of ‘women’ and ‘gender’ within the context of future studies. Likewise, concerns about the future often feature prominently in feminist theory and praxis. Still, we believe that this engagement needs to not only continue but also move beyond its rudimentary stages. It is our hope that this issue will make a further contribution in that direction, towards the expanded interlinking of two already interdisciplinary fields, that of futures and of gender studies.

In conclusion, we would like to thank all the trailblazers, all the creative thinkers and all activists who brought issues around gendered futures into our attention.

## References

- [1] M. Cordell McHale, (Ed.), Gender and change, *Futures* 21 (1) (1989) (special issue).
- [2] M. Cordell McHale, P. Choong, Towards a renewed humanism, *Futures* 1 (21) (1989) 3–4.
- [3] R. Putnam Tong, *Feminist Thought*, Second ed., St. Leonards, Allen and Unwin, NSW, 1998.
- [4] I. Milojević, *Educational Futures: Dominant and Contesting Visions*, Routledge, London, 2005, pp. 133–147.

- [5] C.G. Wagner (Ed.), What women want, *The Futurist* 31 (3) (1997).  
[6] T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, second ed., The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1970.

Ivana Milojević\*, Karen Hurley, Anne Jenkins  
*Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences,  
University of the Sunshine Coast,  
Maroochydore DC Qld 4558, Australia  
E-mail address: [imilojev@usc.edu.au](mailto:imilojev@usc.edu.au) (I. Milojević)*

---

\*Corresponding author.