

8 Gender and the future

Reframing and empowerment

Ivana Milojević

Introduction: asking questions

Is gender a significant factor impacting anticipation? Is it a factor that should be taken into account within the discipline, theory and practice of anticipation? And if yes, how could this factor be used within the practice of *using the future* or when *doing* foresight and anticipation?

Some 15 years ago, Goldstein (2001, p. 57) conducted thorough research within the field of peace studies and concluded that not only does gender continue to be “invisible in political science and history as well as within peace theorising”, but also that those who pay attention to the issue of gender are nearly all women. Furthermore, “all gender references concern women; men still do not have gender” (2001, p. 35). So instead of immediately making an argument in terms of the invisibility or visibility of gender within the fields of futures studies/foresight or the discipline of anticipation perhaps readers may wish to conduct their own research, asking: (1) is gender commonly addressed within these fields/disciplines?; (2) if so, what is the gender of those asking/talking/writing about gender-related questions?; and, (3) do gender references concern mostly women or men as well? Finally, and most importantly, do these discourses go beyond the *women and men dichotomy*, and are they in line with 21st-century changes in both global gender regimes as well as in our contemporary understanding of gender itself?

Doing future, doing gender

It is commonly acknowledged that the future does not yet exist; however, upon closer examination, we can see that the future has already been colonised. It is filled with our expectations, hopes and dreams, or alternatively, fears and nightmares. Subsequently, these ideas and images of the future shape our decisions and actions in the present moment. We believe certain futures to be more or less likely, and adjust our thinking or behaving accordingly. By all rational accounts, the future is not predetermined and cannot thus be known or predicted. Yet it is neither an empty space nor an impotent element; rather, it is an active principle in the present. We simply cannot act without using the notion of the future or

futures in some way. It is our repertoire of future imaginings that sets direction, gives meaning and makes sense of our very existence. Moreover, not everything is possible or plausible in the future, though many things are. This is because the future is influenced partly by, on the one hand, history, social structures and the current reality, and, on the other hand, by chance, innovation and human choice. The future does not yet exist, and by its very definition it never will, and yet the concept is at the very core of our human functioning and identity. We feel superior to the other species that cannot so well plan and anticipate; we take pride in being able to engage in strategy and design, and to implement early interventions to avert disasters. Other species, we believe, can mostly react and/or adapt to the changing conditions which they did not themselves create. While our species is notorious for also waiting for habitual responses to hit a dead end before we change, we take solace knowing that there is at the very least a possibility of transforming before it is too late, and well in time to produce more beneficial outcomes for most of us.

Contrary to this, it is commonly acknowledged that *men* and *women* do exist; however, upon closer examination we can see that these categories are mostly invented. In certain historical periods and places men wore make up and skirts, and some still do. Women waged wars and ran states, and some continue to do so. Even in hyper-masculine cultural spaces, men sometimes cry, because 'nature' or physiology has provided them with a tear duct. And even in hyper-feminine cultural spaces, women sometimes abandon their children, in spite of the 'natural' maternal instinct allegedly given to all who give birth. These facts, however, have not stopped our societies from imagining what the only 'right', possible or normative/desired activity or appearance is for those assigned 'women' or 'men' labels. From our very births, we are prescribed future pathways which, more commonly than not, limit our life experiences and possibilities. Based on our 'prescribed' gender, we are then told about our own limits, duties, future roles and responsibilities, and indeed, how to engage with the future itself.

In the realm of the symbolic, for example, the two standard and in our globalised world, universally accepted symbols denoting female ♀ and male ♂ tell a very different story of two genders in relation to *doing* futures. From many secret symbols that celebrated the power of women and female principles, the symbol of Venus, representing love and sexuality, was chosen for women. Its differentiation from the male symbol and its essence is in the cross below, the cross which, especially if surrounded with the circle, has traditionally been the symbol for the Earth. The men's symbol, the sign of Mars – god of war – has its essence in the arrow: a symbol often viewed as a phallic symbol and as a weapon of war. In the male symbol, the arrow is pointed upright, which is how we commonly draw trends and movements towards the future. Such symbolism implies on the one hand, that the role of women is that of conservers, deeply rooted in the ground, with their essence in the body. Men, on the other hand, are expected to be the ones who transcend their mind, and to be in charge of the future. They are 'the chosen ones' who bring about social, technological and political changes, anticipate where power will move next and preach radically new prophecies.

From sociological, ethnographic and anthropological research, we also learn that historically, and specifically within patriarchal societies, women have been commonly viewed as unchanging essence independent of time, place and social context, relegated to the private sphere of family. In that same context, men were prescribed the role of 'culture agents', the heroic envoys who created civilisation and the public sphere, as well as superiority, hierarchy and dominance. In this context, the 'realistic' future is seen to be the one that maintains this dichotomy and superiority.

It is thus often techno-maniacal and/or dystopian colonisations of the future that are seen as realistic, far-reaching and even logical. When the women's liberation movement threw a challenge to such imaginings and started creating a view of the future based on an alternative reading of gender and gender relationships, they were, and still often are, labelled unrealistic, naïve and utopian. To this day, such thinking is applied to all 'feminine' futures – defined as those diametrically opposite to the 'realistic' futures described above – irrespective of whether these alternative renderings are proposed by women or men. In other words, partnership approaches intended to create more gentle or SHE (sane, humane, and ecological) societies (Eisler, 2001; Boulding, 1976; Robertson, 1980) continue to be marginalised. Instead, HE (hyper-expansionist) or BAU (business as usual) futures, which are sometimes associated with catastrophic or collapse scenarios, continue to be assumed and even expected by global mainstream and dominant discourses about the future.

There is a profusion of evidence to support this interpretation: from the multitude of catastrophic and violent events reported in the news to the dystopic mainstream science fiction futures imaginings – in both cases, and by implication, the future remains bleak. The future continues to be gendered in a very specific and rather conservative way. For example, the three most pressing challenges of our time and for our collective future – ecological, economic and violence related – are also a consequence of previous patriarchal gender arrangements. In the field of gender studies in general, and ecofeminism in particular, research has long established that the nature–culture differentiation in patriarchal societies has been imagined along gender lines. First, women were seen as somehow 'closer' to nature. Second, as women were devalued so was the natural world deemed inferior to human civilisation. Similarly, the assigned role for men was to control, dominate and subdue nature, women included. Cultures and civilisations that had a different approach to the human–nature connection were made invisible and marginalised, and/or colonised.

A similar dichotomy was applied to the sphere of economy – based on measuring 'productive' vs. 'unproductive' work, the first being paid work in the formal economy, even if it meant employment in life destroying industries (e.g. weapons manufacturing, sale and use). Caring work within the *love economy* (i.e. raising of children and managing households) upon which the formal economy rests, was discounted, taken for granted and underappreciated. Recent changes in gender relationships have only slightly dented these structural arrangements. Women have entered the sphere of 'productive' work while simultaneously, and usually,

remaining the main workers within the love economy. The incentive for men entering the latter economy is low, given that irrespective of whether it is done by men or women, this type of work structurally remains free from financial rewards and continues to be invisible to mainstream economics. Lastly, perpetual warfare, militarisation and violent conflict have been gendered in a similar way. The distinction between life-giver-maintainer (i.e. parent) and life-taker (i.e. soldier) has been mostly along female/male lines. The 'doing of gender' remains one among several key variables, if not the key variable, in the 'doing of war/peace'.

On the other hand, where a minimum of gender-role differentiation is imagined or practised, it is usually accompanied by a minimum of overall dominance patterns taking place. It is thus this new vision, a different vision based on different values and a change in power relationships, including a change in the social construction of gender identities – grounded “no longer in dominance and submission but in harmonised acceptance of differences” – which has one of the highest potentials of bringing about “harmony and future of life and hope, instead of wars [nature destruction, severe economic exploitation] and nuclear holocaust” (Accad, 2000, p. 1987). So if we are to address these three most pressing challenges of our time – ecological, economic and violence related – all closely linked to how we ‘colonise’ and anticipate the future – we also need to address the gendered imaginings behind them.

Developing futures and gendered literacy

These previous examples notwithstanding, the world as well as our common understanding of gender and gender relationships has been changing. First, there is a change in how we see or understand the notion of gender itself. Developments in feminist and gender theories (Butler, 1990) have focused on the performativity of gender; that is, on gender as something that we do rather than who we are. Gender in gender studies is understood as distinct from one's biological sex, the former term denoting social practices by which specific gendered orders are established and maintained and the latter denoting male/female physiology and biology. Women and men are, in social theory, no longer seen as existing ontologically, objectively, *sui generis*, *a priori*, generically and ahistorically. Rather, this binary division has been replaced by a multitude of visible genders which are seen as existing epistemologically, culturally and psychologically and via a daily practice of reaffirming socially constructed gender roles, identities and discourses. This is critically important because an understanding of gender as a social construction also means that dominant constructions could be deconstructed, reconstructed and alternatives enhanced and developed. Through the creation and re-creation of our gender identities and behaviours we construct both ourselves as well as our societies and the present-future world(s). Here lies the liberatory potential for our futures, a promise and a hope of a transformation towards better worlds.

However, these theoretical developments are not yet accepted as a shared understanding of gender within mainstream gender discourses in wider society. That is, “many people [continue to] imagine masculinity, femininity and

gender relations only in terms of their own local gender system” (Connell, 2009, p. ix). They therefore simultaneously “miss the vast diversity of gender patterns across cultures and down history” (Connell, 2009, p. ix). This is why one’s own local gender system still often appears natural, ahistorical, universal or even ‘God given’.

Globalisation and new information technologies are currently both forcing us out of such locally grounded myopias as well as reinforcing them. On one hand, we now collectively know more, including knowing more about the alternative social and gender arrangements through time and space. On the other, the ‘Filter Bubble’ phenomenon (Pariser, 2011) enhances our confirmation biases and specific communal preconceptions and thus limits our awareness and choices. These two contradictory occurrences are expected to continue and become even stronger in the future. We will most likely know more overall in the future and will be able to find desired information very quickly, but the knowing will be bounded by the doing of what feels emotionally comfortable and safe.

Parallel to the evolution and stagnation of our gendered understandings, the actual role of genders in contemporary societies is likewise evolving under pressure from cultural, economic, religious and socio-political factors. It is well recognised that different cultures engage with the future differently. Gender, as part of the cultural landscape, also influences how that engagement takes place. Changes in the global economy, for example, are disrupting the myth of provider vs. home maker and the actual ways different genders engage with current economic conditions. Family wages are all but gone and jobs requiring manual strength are being increasingly replaced by automation of work. Jobs in the service and caring industries are on the rise in most places, simultaneously changing the gendered composition of local and migrant workers. New digital technologies also allow for a multitude of gendered expressions – where physical identity can be masked, seen as only one of possible selves – inherently increasing the fluidity of doing gender. As was the case with understandings of gender discussed in the previous paragraph, here too there are contradictory forces at play. On one hand, ‘the real’ as well as the ‘digital’ world demands recognition of what has always been human experience – that of multiple and fluid gender diversities. On the other hand, there are various forms of backlash and ‘back to the past’ efforts which are pushing in a diametrically opposite direction. There are, of course, arguments why such push back is preferential, better for most (i.e. for ‘families’ – here read nuclear or traditional patriarchal families), even ‘natural’. However, more gender equitable worldviews have always allowed for the expression of multiple gender diversities while diversity was suppressed, even severely penalised by death, within more totalitarian and fundamentalist systems of thought and societies. If we are to create a better world in the future, it is the former rather than the latter that needs to be enhanced.

To add to the uncertainty and fragility of creating better futures we can see that three main scenarios of arranging gender regimes (Milojević, 1998) are all currently happening simultaneously (Table 8.1). There are places which continue to insist on strict male/female polarity, those that promote unisex androgyny and

then more open and flexible mindsets comfortable with multiple gender diversities. The first scenario of male/female polarity is the most widespread, still the ‘common sense’ approach to gendered understanding. In line with its essence, this approach insists that not only women and men see the future differently, but that it is men’s seeing that is of more value. The second scenario is pushed by, for example, liberal feminist or communist ideologies of the past, and though fading, is finding some sort of resurrection in our digital era of postgenderism and transhumanist imaginings. In a nutshell, the unisex androgyny scenario asserts that we all see the future irrespective of gender; that is, that gender is not or should not be a variable. This scenario is sometimes extenuated by either technological or spiritual imaginings of genderless techno and/or spiritual beings. These imaginings portray the future beyond gender; the future where this category either does not exist at all or is completely irrelevant.

Lastly, the third scenario assumes different views of the future by different, multiple genders, based on their interaction with history, present environment and both natural and cultural influences. It also assigns them an equal value and asserts the importance of learning from all these multiple gendered perspectives. The proponents of the third scenario, including myself, argue that achieving gender equity and celebrating multiple gender diversities is the very basis and crucial ingredient for the creation of a transformed and better world. In other words, as long as gendered fluidity is repressed and penalised, and as long as our future imaginings are based on one-dimensional gender identities where ‘men are men’ and ‘women are women’, our future presents will remain stifled and limiting. Therefore, the process of transforming futures and of anticipating differently is not and cannot be separated from the process in which we engage collectively in more positive and flexible gender-based understandings and arrangements.

Using the future differently

While the previous discussion may sound abstract and overly theoretical to some readers, the application of these new understandings can be quite simple and straightforward.

Table 8.1 Three gendered scenarios for the future

<i>Scenarios</i>	<i>Gender arrangements</i>	<i>Value</i>	<i>Social arrangements</i>
Traditional	Two genders. Strict male/female polarity.	Men and masculinity more valuable.	Hierarchical, oppressive to the marginalised.
Androgyny	One gender or genderless.	Equal but under the male norm.	Pressure to conform to the norm.
Multiple gender plurality	Multiple genders. Gender diversity, multiplicity.	Equal valuing of all genders.	Equalitarian, democratic, open societies, fluid.

One concrete application is an education project that focused on an alternative cognitive frame to the one based on dichotomous and hierarchical arrangements described previously in the chapter. This alternative cognitive frame envisions a present/future society marked by gender equality, simultaneously challenging all other social hierarchies and focusing on the centrality of human relatedness, valuing peace, justice and life.

As a starting point, the project engaged with traditional stories studied in schools in Serbia and beyond, and while recognising the aesthetic and cultural values of the stories, it challenged various gendered and cultural dichotomies. These include: (1) representation of young women as victims, passive, sleeping beauties who wait for the prince to wake them up and save them (Cinderella, Red Riding Hood, Snow White, Beauty and the Beast, Little Mermaid); (2) representation of older women as evil and dangerous (evil witches, fairies, queens, step-mothers) especially for young women whom they are trying to destroy; (3) representation of men as warriors; and (4) stories directly or indirectly advocating violence against women and creating prejudice against marginalised groups (the story *Magical Language*, the poem *Building of Skadar*). Gender-based, racial and national stereotypes are preserved in a number of these traditional European and Serbian stories. Selfishness, cruelty, spitefulness and manipulations are often common characteristics of ‘the heroes’ and the methods they use to achieve their personal goals. Revenge instead of reconciliation, forgiveness and dialogue is also a common theme. Often other nations are presented as enemies and not as collaborators and potential friends. These stories – chosen for deconstruction within the project – are all part of what has been termed “destructive storytelling” (Senehi, 2010) expressed in folklore, stories, songs, national epics, proverbs and fairy tales, including in various futures imaginings. Destructive storytelling portrays humans as “bad, cruel, violent and selfish”, stories are commonly “full of cruelty, trickery and violence” (Eisler, 2001), including violence against women, children and those who are deemed “different” (Eisler, 2001). Such storytelling is part of the “dominator” mindset (Eisler, 2000), the same mindset pushing towards HE or BAU futures – and which has been challenged from the margins for decades by those of all genders wishing to enhance SHE futures and to establish SHE presents.

Intervention into the previously described discourse was also done via a medium of storytelling that retold these traditional, widely known stories. Storytelling was chosen because it has been shown to be a powerful, flexible, accessible and inexpensive method when working with youth – including being “a more indirect and respectful rather than prescriptive and didactic method” (Senehi, 2010) of communicating new ideas. By providing alternative descriptions of societies and gendered arrangements among the protagonists, the stories worked indirectly on developing both futures and gender awareness and literacy. For many children and even some adults, it was the first time they were exposed to the notion that “the other world is possible”, if only as a seed, an image and an idea. The retold stories were based on the principles of “constructive storytelling”, described as “inclusive, [which] fosters shared power and mutual

recognition, creates opportunities for openness, dialogue, and insight, brings issues to consciousness, can be a means of resistance . . . and an important means for establishing a culture of peace and justice” (Senehi, 2010).

The retold stories reflected values of a democratic, pluralistic and inclusive culture, as well as partnership/gentle/SHE futures for both genders as well as society as a whole. Further, they provided an implicit critique of less desirable, and directly and indirectly violent, ways of behaving and communicating based on traditional dichotomous and hierarchical worldview. They provided an explicit description of more desired ways of behaving and communicating and educated about viable and preferable alternatives based on diversity and inclusion. They also promoted a dialogue and critical literacy, including critical futures literacy, among children – specifically asking questions in terms of how to make informed choices between alternative ways of behaving and communicating with others; and how to make best choices about multiple alternative futures.

Active participation of youth was critical in the final process of creating new stories in which they themselves became the creators of plots and meanings. In this process they engaged with the age-old question of the interaction between social structure and human agency and the role of power in making of knowledge. Practical strategies for further stimulating dialogical approaches and critical literacy when working with students included design of specific embodied activities, arts-based undertakings and games for children. To give a brief idea of the cognitive input and the narratives employed the following summaries of some retold stories is provided in Figure 8.1.

In summary, the retold stories tell of different possible future pathways that expand our gendered life experiences and possibilities. Gendered limits were questioned and future roles and responsibilities, including how to engage with the future itself, were given more flexibility and fluidity. The alternatives created did not stop with the first phase of retelling as later engagement saw teachers, parents, students and whole schools create their own narratives for radically transformed and empowered futures. The students, now authors of new stories themselves, composed texts that commonly went beyond traditional dichotomies and hierarchies and which were then presented to the whole school community (Milojević and Izgarjan, 2014). At the end of the project, the multitude of stories for different presents and improved futures came into being. Follow-up analysis showed that not only was the mindset of those involved expanded, and their gender/future literacy enhanced, there were also changes in actual behaviour and a number of actionable steps taken in the direction of creating more positive presents/future.

Conclusion: gender, future and new avenues to empowerment

The development of a better, more inclusive, equitable, ecologically sustainable and peaceful world throughout the 21st century is directly premised on the re-making of traditional and patriarchal gender identities. We cannot create new, better futures, without creating new, better gender identities and arrangements. We cannot anticipate differently if old cultural templates still limit our



Figure 8.1 Examples of retold story narratives

imaginings based on narrowly prescribed gender categories. This is because old identities based on dichotomous hierarchies have been complicit in creating hierarchies of domination; of devaluing human life and nature. Revaluing nature, peace and sharing and the love economy goes hand in hand with the revaluing of previously suppressed genders and their contribution to the world. The closing of various gender gaps and work on equality for all genders is therefore paramount if we are to make more informed choices for our future, including more informed choices about our own gender-based identities and behaviours.

On the one hand, there are some indications that current global developments will indeed lead to more inclusive and equitable futures. The globalisation of human, women's and LGBTQ rights discourses, the rise in ecological awareness,

flattened networks via social media and digital technologies, increases in peer to peer global communication and the influence of postmodern as well as feminist theories will continue to push towards such futures. On the other hand, economic and ecological collapse, increases in social conservatism and fundamentalism, various forms of backlash against socially progressive movements and ideas will continue to act as both our 'weight of history' and a detrimental pull towards inequitable futures.

As is always the case, any future is premised on actions by humans at present, and dependent on their beliefs about which particular visions of the future are preferable for themselves and the groups to which they belong. Actions by various individuals, groups, communities and societies will remain diverse, conflicting and pulling towards different futures both equitable and inequitable. Hope remains that individuals and groups working towards equitable futures in general and equitable gender futures in particular will prevail eventually, bringing about a better world benefiting most.

For this to happen, enhancing futures and gendered literacy and the awareness of how we *do futures and gender* is the first step in that direction.

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Transforming the Future

People are using the future to search for better ways to achieve sustainability, inclusiveness, prosperity, well-being and peace. In addition, the way the future is understood and used is changing in almost all domains, from social science to daily life.

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