

FUTURES OF WOMEN, WOMEN OF THE FUTURE



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Prepared for delivery to the "Great Decisions" group

La Grande, Oregon
December 9, 1993

Why study the future?

Any futurist worth his or her salt will tell you that the future cannot be PREDICTED. That does not mean we should ignore the future altogether. Not thinking about the future is a bit like driving down the Interstate at 70 miles an hour looking only through the rear view mirror. The world around us is changing at such a pace that we can no longer judge the future simply by what has gone before. We must actively scan the horizon for the coming changes and be prepared for them. We have to anticipate changing road conditions and potential hazards and look ahead. Similarly, the past is no longer a sufficient guide for the coming changes in the future.

There are massive changes ahead that have the potential to utterly transform our society. Those changes include global population growth, the aging of U.S. society, environmental changes, economic transformations, technological revolutions, and global cultural and political change.

How does one study the future?

I believe there are a number of valid ways to plan for the future. Among those methods include: emerging issues analysis, environmental scanning, trend analysis, alternative futures analyses (incasting, backcasting), and scenario building. The two of these techniques which are central to this paper's objective are trend analysis and alternative futures scenarios. The trend, you may surmise from the title of my paper, is the improving status of women. The alternative futures scenarios I'll present are simply the images that feminists have generated to describe their preferred future--the future they would like to live in.

Why political science?

About now you may be wondering why a political scientist would be talking about the future? After all, politicians seem totally focused on only the most narrow of time frames--two to four years to be precise--so why should a political scientist care either. Maybe it is already obvious to some of you why.

It seems to me that the future is perhaps the most political of realms, because determining whichever future actually comes about will be a totally political act. That is to say, that whoever can influence the future will have the most to gain. Moreover, each of us makes individual actions and decisions each day that cumulatively have an impact on the future, so we do have a role to play. The future just doesn't HAPPEN; we make it happen.

Paradigms

Futurists spend a lot of time these days talking about paradigms. A paradigm, loosely-defined, is our worldview--our basic view of the world and reality. A paradigm is also a particular way of looking at the world, a way that has changed in the past and will change in the future. Our cultural paradigm is comprised of our most basic values and assumptions about how the world operates. Our paradigm is our "filter" to interpret what goes on around us.

Many of our basic assumptions, both as a society, and as a global community, are changing radically or are on the verge of change. Clearly, the status of women is just one of those changes.

Why futures, plural?

The title starts "futures of women" and I'd like to clarify exactly what I mean by using the plural FUTURES. I do not believe that there is ONE future out there, but a range of alternative futures which could develop. One reason we cannot predict the future thirty years from now is because there are so many dramatic trends and many of them either converging on, or contradicting, each other. The future is malleable and therefore uncertain. My mentor, Jim Dator, one of the parents of the futures studies field (and the UH Manoa School of Futures Studies), has identified a range of alternative futures distilled from popular images of the future. These include, but are not limited to: Continued Growth; Socialist; New Age; High Technology; Collapse; and, High Spirit societies.

The point is that there are a number of discrete, holistic futures which embody different basic assumptions, or paradigms. I do not mean to suggest that ONLY those scenarios will come about, or that the future will be a pure form of one of these "ideal" types. But we do need to consider a range of possibilities.

Changing status of women

Women's status in western societies has undergone dramatic changes in the past four decades. The changes since World War II have occurred both in the work place and in the home. In the U.S., women's roles during the war effort began the movement of women out of the home and into the work place. "Rosie the Riveter" established women's legitimate place in the work force, and although many women returned to the home to raise families after the war, many did not. In the sixties and seventies, the economic necessity for many households to maintain two-income families further solidified women's status as workers.

The parallel development of a women's rights movement during the sixties furthered women's status by popularizing the plight of women in society. Women also began to get involved in public politics in larger numbers and formed women's lobbying and politics groups, such as the National Organization for Women (NOW). The landmark Roe v. Wade decision was just one indication of the growing influence of women in national politics.

Similar developments took place in Northern European countries after the war. In Scandinavian countries women were elected to political office in large numbers.

Another change, although a subtle one, was the growing power of women to control their own reproductive processes, made possible through the revolutionary birth control pill. What is revolutionary about it is the fact that for the first time in a million years, the female of the species could more effectively plan when or when not to have children.

By the end of the 1970s, woman was no longer "put on a pedestal" as she had been a few decades before. She was no longer expected to be relegated to keeping house and raising the kids; she could also be educated and hold a professional job. The only problem was that many women are now expected to do ALL these things--a point to which I shall return.

Women's movement as a fundamental transformation

While we are adjusting to this changing status of women, we should not believe that this is simply a lifestyle change, nor a minor alteration of social patterns. I believe that the changing status of women is nothing short of a revolutionary transformation in our social and cultural reality, and we have so far only experienced the "tip of the iceberg."

Futures of Women

The first part of this paper is focused on the futures of women, those images of the future which come from women themselves. Given that women's futures images are generated from a context--that is from where women live, work, and play--we must also understand where women "are coming from."

Women of the Present

We must start with some understanding of women's objective and subjective experience. To start with, I am the wrong person to describe women's experience, but I have tried to overcome that handicap by exposing myself to what women have said and written about their experience and by looking through "more objective" evidence, such as statistical data. There is a large and growing literature devoted to women's experience which is accessible to anyone who is interested. It is very political.

Remarkable Trends

Politics. Women were finally given the right to vote in this country in 1920. They have made very slow gains, until very recently, in occupying political offices. There are now growing numbers of women in decision-making roles. For example, in the 103rd Congress there are nearly double the number of House and Senate women members compared to the 102nd Congress, currently 6 in the Senate, and 47 in the House. Women now comprise ten per cent of the Congress. Women are also better represented at the state level where they sit in about 20 percent of all state legislative seats.

In the judicial branch, women are now better represented in the Supreme Court with two members, comprising 22% of that body. However, at the lower federal and state levels women don't fare as well since only 10% of all state and federal judges are women.

At the executive level, women fare even worse, with only 3 serving as state governors--that's only 6%.

The nomination of a male, Clarence Thomas, to the Supreme Court by President Bush brought to light a problem to which women have been objecting for ages--sexual harassment in the work place. Brought to widespread public attention in the Thomas confirmation process, the allegations of Professor Anita Hill may not have bumped Thomas out of the running for the position, but it did educate a couple of generations of American males about the implications of women's growing power. On the other hand, given the continued incidents of date-rape and high level misconduct like the Tailhook and Packwood scandals, many men still "just don't get it."

Painful Trends

Violence against women. Unfortunately, sexual harassment is not the end of gender mistreatment. Far worse than the emotional violence is the physical violence which men unleash on women. The painful statistics are not rare or unusual, they are commonplace:

~ Every 15 seconds a woman is battered in the U.S.

~ Every day 4 women are killed by their husbands or

boyfriends (U.S.)

~ 84 million women (alive today) in Africa (alone) have undergone sexual surgery such as circumcision and infibulation (vaginal stitching)

~ In Bangladesh 50% of all murders are murders of wives by their husbands

These are only a small sampling of the diverse statistics which demonstrate the high levels of violence aimed at women directly by men, and indirectly by social and cultural practices.

Women and ecology.

Many feminist theorists claim a strong link between the behavior of the male gender and male institutions towards both women and the Earth. The violence against women is mirrored, they say, in the levels of environmental destruction now taking place across the planet. The idea that nature is female is a common assumption shared by many cultures across the globe, and now Mother Earth is being abused just like many of her daughters.

Whether you accept this metaphor or not, it is clear that in many parts of the world, it is "woman's world" which is being threatened the most by so-called development: forests, agriculture, fuel sources, housing, and water resources are being destroyed at alarming rates. Those resources are the basic elements of life for a majority of the world's women and the decline of those resources put the greatest pressure on women. It is male-dominated institutions which are largely responsible for this sad state of affairs and women are asking for a change.

Supermom/superwoman.

Even in the so-called advanced countries, the pressure is on women to perform in the public sphere and to maintain much of the status quo on the home front. While women have succeeded in making some inroads into decision-making positions in business and government, they are still expected to perform traditional functions of maintaining a household, taking care of the kids, fixing the meals, and being a good spouse. Not an easy chore. And while the image of supermom has been featured in both advertising and women's magazines, the image has, of late, come under fire for being just what it is--superhuman--and not a normal state of activity.

Not too long after Hilary Rodham Clinton's inauguration to the White House she was lauded as a supermom: attending state functions, giving speeches, lobbying Congress, and attending a school soccer match of Chelsea's--all in the same day. The "supermom" debate was rekindled, when some women's magazines gamely asked if this was the correct role model for most American women.

Radical feminism

I'd like to return to the subject of women's growing power and take you off on a tangent. We have mentioned the growth of women's power in the political arena, but we must also understand the growing social and cultural power which comes from a different part of the women's movement--the least understood and most maligned--the radical feminist movement.

Radical feminism was always a strand of the women's movement, even as far back as the last century and the early part of this one, represented by feminists like Emma Goldman. Radical feminists parted ways with the political feminists sometime during the late 1960s and early 1970s and have continued to follow a basically different path. Where political feminists want to be equally represented along with men, radical feminists want a totally different power structure. Where political feminists want policies and laws that assist women and families, the radicals want a totally new spiritual paradigm.

Beginning with the premise that the "personal is political," radical feminists argued that to adopt traditional political methods would be to play into the hands of male institutions. They sought instead to recreate their own world, their own reality, and sought to give energy to new woman-centered institutions rather than the old male

ones. They built new theories of dominance and power and began to look at the origins of male dominance, which soon became known as patriarchy. The next task was to recreate the basic institutions beginning with religion. They rediscovered or recreated the pagan practices of the pre-Christian world. They now actively promote Great Goddess worship and paganism or woman-oriented aspects of mainstream religions. Mythic remnants of pagan mother-goddess worship can be found in nearly all patriarchal religions: Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. The importance of the Virgin Mary in Catholicism is a classic example. This religious sentiment is captured by the bumper sticker I've seen on the coast, "God is Coming, and Boy is She Pissed."

This trend in women's culture is growing and not easily swept under the rug. While it is not as visible as a woman nominee to the Supreme Court, the cultural implications may be even more profound.

Women's Future(s)

Lesbian separatism. There are at least three mini-trends I can think of that result from radical feminism which could mitigate the growing power of women. One of those might be what I'll call "lesbian separatism," a tendency for some women to reject men entirely--as some sort of evolutionary mistake (which granted we may very well be). This movement, to my way of thinking, is not just to do with a person's sexual orientation but rather an acceptance of an entirely different paradigm.

Male backlash. At virtually the opposite end of the spectrum is male hatred for women, or misogyny, manifesting itself as a widespread backlash against women. There may already be symptoms of this in our society, but the potential for a reversal in the status of women is there. Pressures on the male gender are growing and thus the chances of male backlash may grow. Just as the anti-immigrant movement in Europe has been fueled by loosened immigration laws, so too may violence against women grow, if male dominated society feels truly threatened.

Partnership model. Jumping into the breach is a middle-ground approach, one that has roots in radical feminism, but which seeks a partnership between men and women, rather than the dominance of either. While the partnership model might suggest a radical redefinition of gender roles and the division of labor in society--even the end of patriarchal religions as we know them--it argues against violence toward either gender, and for the growth of healthy relationships between men and women.

Women's images of the future

At the core of any discussion of the futures of women are those images of women about the future which come from feminist literature. One such feminist motif is represented in works such as *Herland* (Charlotte Gilman 1979), *The Kin of Ata are Waiting for you* (Dorothy Bryant 1976), *The Woman on the Edge of Time* (Marge Piercy 1976), and *The Gate to Woman's County* (Sheri S. Tepper 1988). There are many others. All of this group are science fiction or fantasy novels which posit a future world either dominated by women or a world in which men and women share power. Most of these utopian or dystopian novels have common elements: societies "at one" with nature, destratified, decentralized, and to some extent communal societies.

Other images are also described in the literature. For example, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* describes a not-so-distant future where women no longer have rights in a totalitarian male-dominated society. Other works have also described a high tech future where women are treated like furniture.

Mainstream images of women's futures are ubiquitous in commercial advertising and multimedia. Recent AT&T commercials are a case in point. Mom may check in on baby (and dad) while on a business trip, but she's one wheeler dealer in the boardroom! Mainstream, business-as-usual images picture women in fairly conventional roles, more often than not as sex objects.

Women of the Future

So where does all this talk of trends, emerging issues, and images of the future take us? What will become of the changes going on around us in the next century? What will women of the future be like?

One looming question, for example, is: will men and women become more alike? Or more different? And, at what level? There is certainly no agreement among feminists about whether differences are good or bad. Clearly at the biological level there are some differences between the two genders. Are those deterministic differences? Should we strive to obscure the differences between the genders or to heighten them? Anthropological evidence suggests to me that strong polarity between genders is probably not healthy. But is the unisex extreme at the opposite end of the spectrum any better?

The dimensions in which the differences between women and men are expressed include the genetic, biological, cultural, and psychological aspects of our makeup. Genetically, things may be up for grabs soon. Given what we are beginning to learn about the human genetic code--the human genome-- males or females could be constructed as similarly or as differently as is genetically possible. Biologically and physiologically men and women can be constructed similarly or differently as well. Sex change operations have become routine, so changing gender is no problem if you decide you were born into the wrong type. Physiological differences are already narrowing between men and women in advanced countries due to improved health and vitamin use. The most dramatic evidence of this phenomenon is the narrowing gap between men and women's athletic records. Culturally, differences between men and women in sharing "nurturing" and "caring" responsibilities for family and the home environment are narrowing somewhat. The terms "house husband" and "parental leave" were unheard of a few decades ago and are indicative of the blurring of domestic gender responsibilities. Psychologically, women are increasingly in charge of their own procreation, bodies, financial and political lives, and a burgeoning women's "culture."

One way to make some sense out of these sometimes converging and sometimes conflicting trends is to consider a range of alternative futures for women. These scenarios are suggested in some cases by the images of the future that women have and others are suggested by the major trends.

Scenario 1: Continued Growth. This scenario is basically

business-as-usual where women continue to obtain their "rights" but at the cost of playing "supermom" and becoming more like men. Women are able to achieve "equal pay for equal work," but also get equal rates of high blood pressure, heart disease, and other stress-related disorders. Women in the Developing World continue to be exploited and violated.

Scenario 2: Unisex R Us. In this future, technological

changes totally separate procreation from sexual recreation and gender roles; gender change becomes a simple procedure. Children are "designed" from the best genetic material and are expected to experiment with both (or additional) gender roles.

Scenario 3: Separation. Men don't mend their ways; so,

women can do without them and do (for example by establishing lesbian space colonies). Male genetic material may (or may not) be needed, but not the biological item. One trend that fits this scenario is the astounding growth of female-heads-of-household in the U.S. Some lesbians already impregnate themselves producing so-called "baster babies."

Scenario 4: Backlash. In this future, men have had it with

uppity women and put them "back in their place." This might occur after a major global ecological or economic catastrophe such as in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In a backlash against women, polygamy and female slavery might reappear. One trend that might fit this scenario is the fact that in some countries amniocentesis results in up to 95% of all female fetuses being aborted.

Scenario 5: Partnership Model. In this scenario, the basic

differences between genders are maintained, but women share power with men equally. In this future there would be less gender-based divisions of labor and parenting would be a shared responsibility. Other features of this future are a more harmonious relationship with nature and a stronger community orientation.

These scenarios are just sketches of the alternative developments of the next century, but are hopefully thought-provoking. Whether we approve of the changing status of women, or not; whether we accept the need for greater power for women, or not; we must prepare ourselves for the coming changes to our worldview. Don't be the last on your block to have to admit that "you just didn't get it."

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