

Gender Issues

Ivana Milojević

Written for Berkshire Encyclopedia of the 21st Century, forthcoming (2008)

info@metafuture.org; imilojev@usc.edu.au

GENDER ISSUES

Gender refers to the social construction of humans physiologically and biologically identified as women and men. Because gender is a socially constructed category, we are ‘doing’ rather than being men or women. That is, we (humans) engage in the cultural behaviours of practicing femininity and masculinity. However, gender categories are much more fluid than simply those of women/men; they exist on a continuum between these two ‘ideal types’ (of females and males). Most people exhibit a combination of what are believed to be binary opposing female and male traits such as, for example: intuition/instinct versus rationality; receptive/passive versus active; protective/nourishing versus forceful/assertive; moon- versus sun-like. This symbolism – binarism between two genders – exists in most world cultures but the actual manifestation/description of these traits differs through space and time. Contemporary global culture is significantly based on this dualism, which is, however, being challenged by some significant future trends.

In addition to developments in science, technology and medicine, various cultural changes have also destabilised the common sense approach to how we ‘do’ gender. One of the most significant cultural forces of the twentieth century has been feminism. This social movement – as well as ideology, worldview, theory, practice and way of life – has insisted that gender identities need to become both more fluid and socially accepted. There are many feminisms and women’s movements globally and so the issues of gender differences and identities are seen/defined/theorised in a multitude of ways. What is common to all these feminist’s and women’s orientations is that they wish to change the situation in which femaleness is seen as a disease, an aberration from the norm, and replace it with acknowledgment that this category is an asset with intrinsic value.

These various women’s movements also share a belief that many of our contemporary challenges are a result of the domination of one gender – male – and of the priorities given to values traditionally assigned to masculinity. For example, spiritual eco feminists assert that the environmental challenges we are facing today partially arise from the binarism of civilisation versus nature, and the higher value attached to the former. Such binary thinking is in turn premised on the male versus female division and the overall patriarchal worldview. This worldview envisions and promotes certain (successful, powerful, dominating) males to be at the top of the social hierarchy and *over* other (weaker) males, and women, other species and nature in general. Gender issues are thus not simply side issues, to be relegated to the spheres of gender identities, sexuality and family. Rather, they are embedded in all that our human species believes and practices. This includes how we commonly perceive our futures and how we engage with social innovation and change.

The futures of gender

To further describe contemporary processes and trends in relation to gender issues it is useful to outline three main scenarios for gender futures. Each will have radically different implications for the future of our local communities and global society.

Continued female–male polarity

Female–male polarity represents the traditional model, where differences between (only two) genders are potentiated and exaggerated. These two genders are seen as fixed, biologically determined and ahistorical/unchangeable. Most commonly, it is perceived that these two genders are distinct, having separate spheres of influence and very different attributes; at the same time, it is the male side that is more highly valued. This male side or masculinity is expressed through attributes of strength, courage, assertiveness, action, creation and self-confidence, all seen as being in-born to any human that is recognised as a male in a biological/ physiological sense. Sometimes, it is perceived that these two spheres of female/male influence are different but are/should be valued equally. This orientation exists in both more traditional social settings as well as in contemporary ones, albeit taking different forms.

To further enhance polarity between various genders, humans have engaged in certain bodily and spatial practices. Bodily modification as a mark of feminine/masculine identity has deep and ancient tribal roots. Some of the older practices (i.e. corset wearing, foot binding) have mostly been abandoned, while others (i.e. genital mutilation, piercing, tattooing, scarification, circumcision) are continuing. And of course new means of enhancing ones femininity or masculinity through various forms of body art are constantly being invented. Modern medicine and health science have allowed for physical manipulation of both female and male bodies towards (place- and time-specific) perceived ideals of femaleness and maleness. Reproductive organs are thus manipulated and/or enhanced – as is overall body appearance – through nutritional supplements, medicines, exercises and plastic surgery. The rates of plastic surgery in the western world – mostly to enhance one's desirability and appeal to the other sex – have been continuously on the rise. These practices are most commonly entered into in order to fit the norm of perceived feminine/masculine beauty and thus affirm the female–male polarity. Other cultural practices of affirming this polarity incorporate division between private and public spheres and the segregation of females and males within each respective sphere. The male backlash in 'post-feminist' times and the continuation/revival of religious and political fundamentalism also heavily rely on the bi-polarity of genders.

Rarely, female–male polarity is used to imagine/work towards the creation of radically different societies. For example, in some feminist/women's and moralist discourses, 'feminine' qualities of nurturing, caring, compassion, emotional sensitivity, vulnerability and intuition are seen as core strengths essential to the development of a better society. This is diametrically opposite to the values of patriarchal societies that award a second grade status to anything womanly or feminine. Radical forms of celebrating everything

feminine are rare but do occur; at the more extreme and less common end are woman-centered heterosexual and lesbian separatism, female suprematism, matriarchy and gynarchy. These latter forms most commonly exist as an idea only, rather than finding their way into past/present reality.

Even though female–male polarity has been the dominant model for organising gender so far, and although its residues are going to follow us into the future, this model is, in general, most likely to remain a product of past and contemporary times.

Unisex androgyny

One of the earliest and most persistent goals of feminist and women's movements has been to abolish sex roles and distinctions between feminine and masculine behaviour/attributes. The ideal of an androgynous future was thus propagated among these groups but also in the context of a wider society. Some twentieth century socialist societies promoted an androgynous ideal of dress and behaviour not only in practice but also as an ideal future wherein sexual equality manifests. Unisex androgyny is also imagined as a psychological condition or characteristic, where men increasingly adopt traditional 'women's virtues' while women increasingly adopt virtues traditionally seen as masculine. Futurists Aburdene and Naisbett (1992: 262) have argued that in the future successful human beings will have to possess a combination of masculine and feminine traits. They also argued that as a group, women have better absorbed positive masculine traits, mostly because those were valued for centuries by male-dominated societies.

Scenarios in which women and men become physically more similar (as in the case of hermaphroditism, where the individual has primary and secondary sexual characteristics of both genders) are highly unlikely, although some claim that in the future it will be more difficult to establish the 'natural' gender of some individuals. Developments in medical science would enable mutations such that we would be able to change gender as we wish, and alternate the procreative functions that we today associate only with one gender or the other. Women won't need men (sperm banks) and men won't need women (artificial wombs), or reproduction won't need either women or men (reproduction of babies in factories). If seen as a means to eliminate sexual stereotyping of human virtues, androgyny would be very close to some feminist ideals. Since division by gender is one of the oldest and most established divisions between humans, movement towards androgyny might be potentially liberating and revolutionary. But some feminists, for example Gloria Steinem, reject the concept of androgyny as it can lean towards conformist and unisex visions which are the opposite to the individuality and uniqueness envisaged in their understanding of feminism.

On the other hand, an ideal society would be one in which all differences would have freedom of expression. If the next centuries bring into reality reproduction external to the human body, the main reason for maintaining different social functions and roles for women and men would disappear, thus contributing to the formation of androgynous

societies. Androgynous societies might be also formed as a by-product of removing socially prescribed qualities for each gender, and we might see future societies consisting of humans, rather than of men and women.

Multiple gender diversities

This vision/scenario/model proposes that it is not an androgyny of sameness that is the answer to sexual politics but rather freedom from repression and dominance as well as freedom of choice (Harris, 1980). The underlying assumption here is that physiologically, anatomically, neurologically, psychologically and culturally there exists a vast diversity among humans and to organise this diversity along one or two dimensions is unrealistic and detrimental. This scenario thus challenges the idea of heteronormativity in which female genitalia = female identity = feminine behaviour = desiring male partner. Or alternatively, for males, male genitalia = male identity = masculine behaviour = desiring female partner (*Wikipedia*, entry on third gender). There are many names given to a combination of sexual and gender identities, depending on whether one feels/behaves simultaneously like both genders, neither or something completely different. Terms such as third (fourth, fifth) gender, transgender, genderqueer, gender-bender, transsexual, intersexual, pangender and bigender are introduced (*Wikipedia*). Such scenarios of multiple gendered identities are not a recent invention and can be found through much of human history. As well, what exactly is considered ideal female or male identity/behaviour has also varied through space and time.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the general trend is towards this type of recognized multiplicity rather than towards forced uniformity. This scenario is most likely for the future since there is no longer a simple answer to the question “Who is woman (man)?”. Positions which describe sexes as ultimately biological categories are now considered simplistic naturalism and essentialism. The development of medical science has further destabilized essentialist views of gender. If we accept that ‘women’ and ‘men’ are mostly socially constructed categories, it is obvious that we cannot have only one construction and that those constructions would change over time. The creation of a society in which every difference is able to find expression would be dear to the heart of liberals and most feminists. A society which accepted multiple gender diversity would definitely create the greatest space for individual freedom and non-conformist persons. Ultimately, this will be another way of destabilizing the importance of gender in defying personal roles and functions within society. This appears to be the most likely – of the three scenarios – to gain recognition in the twenty-first century. This recognition is likely to be further enhanced by an overall shift towards individualism. As well, our contemporary frames of reference are global rather than being contained within particular societies and communities, therefore awareness of different ways of doing gender globally are only going to increase. In turn, this awareness is likely to further the diversification of genders, gender roles and identities.

Implications for the future of our global human society

During times of female–male polarity the division of labour among the two genders promoted unbalanced societies. For example, women were primarily in charge of child rearing, housekeeping, health care and education. Their work has thus mostly been relegated to the private sphere of the non-monetised ‘love economy’. On the other hand, men have been in charge of higher socially desired positions, dominating decision making and the monetised, professional public sphere. Unisex androgyny has challenged this division; however, it is mostly women that have entered the traditional male sphere and not vice versa. Likewise, the sameness of unisex androgyny is predominantly modelled upon a male norm.

The emergence of multiple gender diversities fundamentally challenges the societies we inherited. Once people become free to express themselves along the male–female continuum depending on internal and external circumstances – without fear of reprisal – more democratic and fairer societies will result. These societies will have flattened hierarchies, be more integrated and diverse and exhibit qualitatively different human–nature and human–human relatedness. New information and communication technologies are also going to be helpful in creating these societies of wider freedom and choice. This does not imply that future societies based on multiple gender diversities are to be/come perfect, utopian. But they may well become eutopian, that is, become a better option than our present and past conditions. None of this is to be taken for granted, as any future is premised on the action of present humans.

Bibliography:

Aburdene, P., & Naisbitt, J. (1992). *Megatrends for Women*. New York: Villard Books.

Harris, S. (1980), quoted in Kramarae C., & Treichler P.A. (1985). *A Feminist Dictionary*. London: Pandora Press, p. 50.

Steinem, G. (1983), quoted in Kramarae C., & Treichler, P.A. (1985). *A Feminist Dictionary*. London: Pandora Press, p. 50.

Milojević, I. (1998). Learning from feminist futures. In D. Hicks & R. A. Slaughter (Eds.), *1998 World Yearbook for Education* (pp. 83–95). London: Kogan Page.

Wikipedia, on-line encyclopaedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page