Women
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WOMEN

Dividing humans into groups based on their sex/gender is one of the oldest practices in organizing human affairs. While one's sex/gender is most commonly taken for granted within societies or social groups, the meanings attached to this term historically and spatially vary significantly, and current social and scientific developments and futures trends are further destabilizing the common approach to dividing humans into men and women. That is, a human individual becomes a part of social group called 'women' based on either certain biological characteristics (of being a woman) or social practices (of 'doing' femaleness). Various contemporary social movements are challenging both.

Developments in medical science have enabled gender to be more fluid than ever before. One's 'lived' gender is today much less grounded in what nature 'intended' and biology thus becomes less of a destiny. Indeed gender can be invented. While gender ambivalence did exist in earlier human societies – as seen through the construction of mythological figures that are transgressive of gender-bi-polarities and are gender fluid – it is now possible to change one's sexual physiology later in life. The sexual physiology with which we are born is modifiable – one can choose to become a woman or to stop being a woman. Thus, the natural characteristic of the sexes can be transformed and changed, women becoming men and vice versa. Other criteria, related not to being a woman but to practicing femaleness or doing gender, have become even more unstable. For example, the appearance criterion is challenged by transdressers and transvestites. The sexual orientation criterion has been problematic for much longer, given that homosexuality among humans has (probably) always been present. The social category of women (or men) is also problematic since any universalist statement about women/men can be questioned from the position of epistemological (and) group minorities and their differing perspectives. That is, in organizing their societies, humans have introduced additional ways of dividing themselves: women/men are further divided based on their age, race, ethnicity, religion, physical and mental ability and class. Hence, whichever individual and social group is prescribing 'women's' or 'men's' essence is inevitably going to do so under the influence of these other social signifiers.

Feminists have insisted that it is crucial to differentiate between the social category of women and the social mythology attached to it. The former refers to a class of human beings identifiable through their sexual physiology, the latter to a mythology that exists in each society and is most significantly constructed by more powerful individuals/social groups. This mythology is instrumental in making sense of our lives and societies and in orienting our thinking and behaviour. Feminists have also insisted that due to the patriarchal character of most contemporary societies, women are currently disadvantaged both as a social category and as mythological persons. The following section of this entry focuses on some crucial global trends that are impacting upon a social group and a class of human beings identified as women.

Trends for women

Given the unevenness of global statistical analysis and reporting in general and in relation to gender issues in particular, the analysis of world-wide trends for women can not be but indicative. As well, the diversity of societies and various social group experiences within them ensures that there are a multitude of options (rather than a clear and universal global trend) for today's and for future women. For example, economic globalization has opened up many new possibilities for younger, professional women to enhance their living experience. At the same time, this same trend is related to more hardship for poorer, less educated and older women. Likewise, scientific developments that benefit human lives are still not fairly shared amongst people/women globally, and neither are the effects of environmental degradation. For example, while women in the more economically developed world are on average having fewer children and are experiencing fewer risks associated with childbirth and pregnancy, women in the economically poorer areas of the world have qualitatively different experiences during their reproductive years. UNICEF estimates that a woman's lifetime risk of dying from maternal causes is 1 in 16 in Africa, while this risk in Europe is 1 in 1,400. Negative consequences of climate change are also likely to impact on women in certain geographical areas (i.e. areas already poorer and prone to drought and/or flooding) much more than on women living elsewhere. To complicate matters further, women who actively participate in consumer societies and are gaining the benefits of modern life's luxuries are themselves contributing to the deterioration of living conditions of women and girls living in other societies.

This diversity of women's experiences globally may be an additional factor influencing the general absence of global future projections for women. At the same time, there is data that confirms the continuation of general global disadvantage of women's sex/gender, relative to men. For example, the *Encyclopedia of the Future* (1996) forecasts an increase in the global female population to 4.2 billion in 2025 and to 5.790 billion in 2200. Of these women, 1.8 billion and 100 million respectively are still to be denied 'full rights of equality'. This is, however, an improvement from data for 1995. Then, of 2.859 billion women, 2.500 billion are estimated to have been denied those rights. Data in other areas also forecasts progress, although women are to continue outnumbering men as poor, illiterate, refugees and for illness in both 2025 and 2200: women as a percentage of all poor (in 1995: 70%; 2025: 60%; 2200: 55%); women as a percentage of all illiterates (in 1995: 66%, 2025: 55%, 2200: 52%); women as a percentage of all refugees (in 1995: 80%, 2025: 70%, 2200: 60%) and women as a percentage of all ill/sick (in 1995: 75%, 2025: 57%, 2200: 52%). On the other hand, world income and property ownership data position men as continuing to earn/own more: the percentage of world income received by women is predicted to remain low (1995: 10%, 2025: 20%, 2200: 40%), as is the percentage of world property owned by women (1995: 3%, 2025: 10%, 2200: 20%).

Another of the (rare) documents that outlines main global trends for women is a publication by the UN, *The World's Women: Trends and Statistics 2000.* This report outlines several main global trends for women. First, it records a closing but persistent gender gap in education. For example, UNESCO projects show no decline in the gap in literacy between women and men over the age 15 by the year 2025 and a continuation of current levels (that two-thirds of the illiterates in the world are women). Secondly, the report notes changes in reproduction and family structure.

Some of the trends in this area include a decline in early marriage and early childbearing in most regions of the world (with the exceptions of Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa), a decline in the desired number of children expressed by women in the developing world and an increase in the use of contraceptives with a subsequent decline in fertility rates in almost all countries, and a significant increase in births outside marriage and single-parent families in developed regions. Thirdly, the UN sees no significant increase in women's participation in the top levels of government and business, globally (with the exception of 1990s Sweden wherein 55% of government ministers were women). Fourthly, changes in work patterns are noted. For example, women's economic activity rates have increased in most regions of the world, with the exception of sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe and Central Asia and Oceania. But even though the gender gap in rates of formal economic activity is diminishing, women still engage in informal, unpaid work of 'sweet equity' or the 'love economy' much more than men. In addition to this gendered division of labour, the reality of women receiving less pay than men is also continuing. On the other hand, one promising trend in the opposite direction is the overall increase in women-owned businesses and women's self-employment, especially in OECD countries. Finally, the report discusses health issues and concerns. In particular, it expresses concern over the toll of HIV/AIDS on the world's women. Not only are women being impacted more than men by the work of caring for ill family members, but they themselves now make up almost half of the 32.4 million adults living with the disease and half of the 12.7 million adults who have died from it. In 1999 women represented 52% of those that died from AIDS worldwide. The situation for women is the worst in sub-Saharan Africa where a woman's risk of becoming infected is considered to be two to four times higher than that for a man.

Other significant trends negatively impacting women globally are the decline of the welfare state; an aging population in the industrially developed world; casualisation of the workforce; selective abortion of female fetuses; continuation of global wars and violence; the increased influence of fundamentalist, right-wing thinking; and the continuous representation of women in global media through patriarchal lenses. Indeed, global patriarchy supports the present manifestation and extension of global capitalism. Thus it is women who are expected to provide services that buffer the negative aspects of economic restructuring, mostly in so-called transitional economies but also elsewhere. The push to part time and casualisation of the workforce deprives women more than men of benefits such as superannuation and sick leave entitlements. Patriarchal, right-wing and fundamentalist thinking is especially detrimental to women: from impacting on their self-esteem and view of self worth (i.e. objectification of women in contemporary global culture), to decreasing opportunities in the public sphere and even reducing the chances of survival for many women (i.e. women and girls as casualties of 'honour' killings, acid burning, selective abortion, domestic violence, as well as of terrorist attacks and wars).

Fortunately, despite this gloomy picture, some parallel trends have more positive impacts for women globally, both at the moment and in terms of helping create more gender balanced societies in the future. The emergence of a unified global network society is also facilitating more participatory, democratic and network based styles of communicating. Women are capitalizing on this via, for example, using UN human rights instruments to address women's economic inequality in different parts of the world, and also by using new technologies (the Internet) for electronic inclusion, campaigning, commerce and consultation. Rather than being seen as only the passive recipients of global changes, women are now more commonly perceived

as active participants in the creation of our common futures. Women's voices and demands for inclusion are now at least heard at the global level. And so are women's demands for global interconnections that are more inclusive and more fully human(e). Due to demographic trends of migration many societies have by now become much more multicultural; this increase in cultural diversity will most likely increase the inclusive principle of respecting and valuing all our differences. Expansive (rather than token or pragmatic) multiculturalism is likely to positively impact on women, as is the continuing influence of ecological and peace movements. The move towards the creation of a more sustainable future cannot afford the continuation of discrimination against either one gender or indeed any other social group. This awareness of the world as being interconnected and interdependent will result in the realization that sustainable betterment of one group cannot occur at the expense of any other.

Scenarios for women

Given the multiple and opposing effects of the above mention trends it is useful to briefly outline some key scenarios for women's as well as global futures (that have gender issues at their core). These archetypal scenarios include: (1) continuation of status quo/global patriarchy/hyper expansionist (HE) futures; and (2) emergence of global equity based gender balanced futures. The outlining of these two scenarios is not limited to so-called 'women's issues', but investigates the broader social and planetary impacts of each. By developing such scenarios, it is possible to take into account factors impacting on women as a social category as well as those aspects which are impacting on the social mythology attached to this notion.

1. Global Patriarchy

In the 1970s Mary Daly asserted that patriarchy appeared to be everywhere: even outer space and the future seemed to have been colonised. The first decade of the twenty-first century is already marked (mostly in the west but also communicated through global media) by 'post-feminism', 'raunch' culture, the 'global war against terror', 'new surveillance methods and technologies' – arguably all manifestations of a patriarchal project for our present and our (global) future. The continuation of this scenario is facilitated by those trends that are negatively impacting on women (discussed in the previous section). The Global Patriarchy scenario puts women's liberation on permanent hold: there will always be more important causes to work toward. Thus global patriarchy heavily invests in, among other causes, contemporary Fortress OECD and Vengeance Forever scenarios of war and direct and structural violence. Both of these scenarios depend on a strong military, on domination, force and strong masculinist engagement. The Fortress scenario cannot succeed if any signs of 'weakness' or empathy towards the other appear or develop. It depends on othering – us and them – the dominant feature of patriarchal discourse, where women are usually the first ones upon which the process of othering is practiced. The Fortress scenario will in general increase insecurity, both among those that are 'in' and those that are 'out'. Anxieties will spill over and result in an increase in violence against women, children, and nature. In the Vengeance Forever scenario, women will be seen as valuable commodities; after all they are the ones that give birth to the nation.

In general then, Global Patriarchy works towards creating a future that is (even) more competitive, challenging, and basically insecure. In this future world there is little space for alternative ways of living and doing things, given the victory of economic globalization. Other

important features of the Global Patriarchy scenario include: (1) society is profit and growth oriented, hierarchical; (2) the world is populated by the 'global consumer'; (3) the free flow of capital is not accompanied by the free flow of people; (4) poverty remains higher among women, racial and ethnic minorities, and other marginalized social groups; (5) the nuclear family is still seen as the most desirable family form because it is best at fostering individualism; (6) among the elites and the wealthy, population is controlled in terms of 'quality' (search for perfection), while among poor populations it is controlled in terms of 'quantity'; and (7) dominant values in the global society are the admiration of individualism, competition, and success, and breaking the boundaries of the physical world in terms of appearance, youth, abundance and excess.

Of course, the Global Patriarchy scenario does yield some benefits. These include the positive impacts of new technologies such as flexibility of work, an increase in communication across the world, increased human longevity, the wiping out of certain genetically inherited diseases and higher security in some areas (though provided by global monitoring and surveillance). Still, these positive occurrences will likely be reserved for the most dominant social groups. But in the world in which the majority of human inhabitants are 'deprived of basics and promise, there will not be any peace and security' [Udayakumar, 1995]; thus, the Global Patriarchy scenario cannot but result in a major collapse. Despite all its efforts to the contrary, this scenario is not life- and social order- sustaining in the long term.

2. Gender Balanced Equitable Futures

This scenario requires an end to polarization not only between female and male but also on any other grounds – race, class, age, ability, worldview, religion. Various social movements such as ecological, spiritual, peace and women's/feminist ones work together to bring out 'feminine' principles of embracing, empathy, connectivity, compassion and caring. The Gender Balanced Equitable Futures scenario requires and is based on balancing our need for expansion (inventing/creating more with less) with our need for conservation (sustainability and security). National and religious identities are also balanced with terrestrial identity. This includes work on Global Ethics, an Earth Charter, global governance, strengthening of local communities – not only a Gaia of civilisations but also a Gaia of balanced and strong localities in an interconnected and interrelated world. Any equity based futures scenario has to be founded on principles of economic justice and fairness; that is, a 'win-win world' of multiple economies rather than global capitalism's singular dominant. Economic development is, in this scenario, seen as important but is defined in broader terms. Indicators of economic progress are connected with long-term indicators of continuation/ sustainability and horizontal indicators of stress/quality of life. The Gender Balanced Equitable Futures scenario is also based on principles of gender justice and balance, reflecting Elise Boulding's image of a gentle, androgynous society or Riane Eisler's image of a partnership society/gylany. No sustainable global society, information or otherwise, can exist without economic, social and gender justice.

Masculinist means of conflict resolution are in this future scenario replaced by peaceful conflict resolution, mediation and non-violent communication. Patriarchal religions that demand blood (sacrifices pleasing to gods: firstborn sons, animals or infidels) are replaced by life-sustaining principles that have always existed in various religious and spiritual traditions of the world. These 'holy peace cultures' keep their own methodological diversity and uniqueness while simultaneously engaging and respecting other traditions. Vast resources are invested in conflict

prevention and resolution, as peace is seen as the prerequisite for progress. In such ways humans are creating the common ground for a new planetary cosmology that emphasizes the interconnectedness of all living beings. The desired family may take many forms but its basic principles are of democratic engagement/participation, respect and non-violence. This society also respects and encourages multiple gendered identities, and this gender diversity creates more space for individual freedom and expression. In the Gender Balanced Equitable Futures scenario, gender multiplicity has been recognized as having always existed and has replaced forced uniformity (as in unisex androgyny) as well as female–male polarity options. Parenting is seen as one of the most important functions of a society. Education is also given priority because of the view that without awareness of social and natural processes, interpersonal and group relationships, as well as the psychological and physiological processes within the self, humanity cannot prosper.

The main values in this scenario are justice, equity, fairness, peace, inner and outer transformation, human/global/planetary security, and the long-term view. Dialogue and sustainability are the new norm but this new norm is not jeopardizing scientific and technological progress. The main organizational principle is a network, facilitated by the development of new information and communication technologies.

The Equitable Futures scenario may also potentially have some detrimental impacts on global human society. One of its main weaknesses is its predominant focus on the distribution of wealth, which can then jeopardize the creation of wealth that is to be distributed. As well, inner development and transformation that focus on emotional and spiritual aspects may negatively impact on social efficiency and punctuality. The dominance of ethics based on inclusivity and non-violence may also slow down economic, scientific and technological growth and development. Still, while these and some other potential negative effects need to be taken into account, overall this scenario is much more beneficial for the world's women. It is also currently our best hope for long(er)-term survival as a species and for the creation of a healthier planet.

In conclusion, today's and future women are facing many challenges, both old and new. In some areas of the world and among certain social groups women's overall position in society has improved while in others their position and quality of life has deteriorated overall. Future trends and developments will continue to have an uneven effect on the world's women. At the same time, based on the continuation of the status quo/business as usual scenario, the patriarchal system of organizing human affairs is likely to remain with us for a while longer. But Global Patriarchy is not a sustainable futures scenario. Fortunately, there is a more sustainable and fairer alternative. This gender balanced alternative is currently encouraged by various social, economic, demographic and ecological trends as well as by changes in consciousness and by social movements that focus on equity/justice/fairness. The world's women collectively represent a leading force for the coming of gender balanced, equitable futures. This is because they intimately understand that such futures are crucial for the long-term survival of our species and benefit not only women but ultimately all other human and non-human living beings.

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