



Introduction

Beyond Hesitancy: Dialogues and Reflections on Feminist Futures

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Abstract

*This Symposium response builds on the themes of *The Hesitant Feminist's Guide to the Future* (2024) and the contributions of thirty authors that emerged from it. The Symposium itself arose from a year-long engagement with the theme of feminist futures and affirms the enduring necessity of feminist thought and action in futures studies. The contributions, published as articles, essays, or texts in *JFS Perspectives*, explore diverse themes, including gender inclusivity, participatory research, feminist foreign policy and international relations, state and familial patriarchy, decolonial feminism, work and entrepreneurship, motherhood, time, ecology, and inner psychological processes such as hope and empowerment. The authors' 'positionality' is equally diverse; geographically, they are spread across the globe. This diversity of thought is reflected in a range of methodological approaches, with contributors employing techniques such as Causal Layered Analysis and speculative design to explore alternative futures. What they share, however, is a commitment to challenging patriarchal and techno-utopian narratives while simultaneously advocating for intersectional and transformative approaches to futures thinking. In summary, the collection reinforces the potential of feminist thought to reshape dominant narratives and create new pathways towards inclusive and sustainable futures.*

Keywords

Feminist Futures, Intersectionality, Participatory Foresight, Decolonial Feminism, Gender-Inclusive Security

Introduction

The symposium on feminism, gender issues, and futures is the result of a year-long process that began in preparation for International Women's Day 2024. A year later, thirty authors engaged with the issues I responded to and further raised in *The Hesitant Feminist's Guide to the Future*, published by Tamkang University in July 2024. As always, Tamkang University Press and the Journal of Futures Studies have stayed true to their "copyleft" or "open source" policy, making the electronic version of the publication freely available for distribution. The same applies to the symposium that grew out of this publication, which testifies to Tamkang University's and the Journal of Futures Studies' ongoing commitment to creating alternative and inclusive futures.

The symposium's topic itself is not a popular one. Indeed, feminism in general, and feminist futures in particular, commonly receive negative press to the extent that even many members of a social group – i.e., women – that have benefited from it and continue to benefit sometimes denounce it. It seems redundant, yet it is imperative to remind people of the benefits women have received due to generations of activists and theorists within multiple women's and feminist movements. The list is long and can be easily found with a quick search on any Internet browser. Yet, as has also consistently been pointed out, feminism did not and does not benefit only one social group or one gender. Rather, as a fundamentally inclusive philosophy and social movement, it has aimed to "open up" the future to all.

Since feminism(s) most commonly theorise genders on a continuum, there is rarely a "cut-off point" wherein one group is "in" and another "out". This stands in stark contrast to patriarchal imaginings, which envision only two allegedly very different genders. Feminism, on the other hand, envisions all genders – the multiplicity which both nature and culture intended – collectively working on the task of creating better futures. What would futures studies

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look like if only one gender were to have a say? How closed would all our futures become? And how one-dimensional would we ourselves remain?

Since its inception, feminism has stood for equal opportunities for all, such as equal ability to speak, write, and be heard. It has also stood, and still stands, for all genders having an equal say in creating individual and collective futures. To me, this seems a “no-brainer” that should make feminism as popular as any other ideology aiming to dismantle social hierarchies and the various forms of violence that accompany them. Yet the backlash against this egalitarian and inclusive political project of feminism remains.

Thankfully, there is always a creative minority that goes against the detrimental popularism which feeds off historical and existing social hierarchies. I am thrilled to see that *The Hesitant Feminist's Guide to the Future* did not suffer the slow and painful death of snubbed indifference. After thirty years of working in the field of feminist futures, sadly, this has become my expectation and depressing conclusion. So, I am personally thankful to each and every author who engaged with the topic of feminist futures and submitted an entry for the symposium.

The entries themselves testify to the ongoing relevance of feminism. Feminism is relevant geographically – there are entries focused on local issues within all continents. Feminism is relevant thematically – it is not a “laundry list of women’s issues”; rather, every area of our individual and social lives can be scrutinised within a feminist framework. Feminism is relevant at both personal and social levels – as before, “the personal is political” and vice versa. Finally, feminism is relevant for understanding our pasts and presents and for imagining preferred futures – utopias for all.

Are feminist futures “unthought futures”? Haya Al-Noami, in the first article of the symposium, believes so. And yet, what better framework is there to challenge familial and state patriarchy, as well as techno-neo-liberal-colonised national visions, in the context of the Gulf states? Isn’t this framework absolutely necessary if the dystopia of the future being a “desert” – barren and deserted – is to be replaced with a more hopeful metaphor of “the future as a garden”? A future garden which, above all, requires “continuous care, love, alteration, and cooperation”.

“Why do we keep on creating ‘futures disconnected from dust’?” asks Sarah Elsie Baker. What are the ramifications of unchanged techno-utopias and dystopias since the 1950s? How do these memories of the future “influence, and constrain, the collective imagination”? Ultimately, can we design beyond binaries and cultivate space for “thick presents”, which might be our best hope to move away from systems that perpetuate social and environmental injustice?

Two entries in the symposium address one of the most pressing issues of our time: global human security. Chronic warfare is one of the most pronounced manifestations of patriarchy – a system that demands some male dominators to subjugate all women and other “weaker” or “lesser” men. Kimberly Digolin and Jonathan de Assis, on the other hand, envision security practices based on inclusivity and equity for peace. In the true spirit of feminism, they call for “participative processes that reflect diverse social realities and ensure more just futures for all social groups”.

Similar calls are made by Clara Jöster-Morisse, who explores the application of feminist-informed foresight to the futures of Feminist Foreign Policy. Like most feminist theorists, she is critical of “what is” and focuses on “what could be”. Her critique of “what is” does not remain within the realm of traditional foreign policy but extends to current practices of feminist foreign policy as well. In that regard, Foster-Morisse reminds us of key feminist principles, such as “non-violence, the ethics of care and well-being, and non-hierarchical gender relations”, which expand the notion of “security” to go beyond the absence of visible conflict and include the absence of gender-based violence in all its forms. She also demonstrates the participatory nature of feminist research by including insights from interviews with feminist foreign policy experts and their views on foresight.

That feminist research is participatory is best demonstrated in the texts by Lena Rissman and Denise Bianco and Anisah Abdullah. These authors craft narratives based on collective insights, shaped collaboratively by themselves and their interviewees. While Rissman and Bianco explore how to utilise speculative design to destigmatise the menstrual cycle in organisational contexts, Anisah interrogates what it would take to “feminise futures”. Both texts, like much of feminist theorising, provide viable alternatives to the issues in question. Namely, instead of the stigma that accompanies the female body and the perception of natural processes such as menstruation as signifiers of “inferiority, shame, irrationality, and incompetence”, Rissman and Bianco offer an aspirational vision of the future supported by a “step-by-step” process integrating speculative design. Anisah not only examines the systemic,

societal, and individual challenges faced by female futures practitioners, but also outlines what transformative futures could look like. Utilising Causal Layered Analysis, Anisah’s astute insights go beyond the litany of “gender equality” to propose a host of supportive systems, worldviews, and transformative metaphors that underpin feminised futures. Her concluding section, titled “how things can change”, could indeed serve as a motto for feminist thinking overall.

While intersectionality has accompanied feminism since its inception – there have always been feminists concerned with class, ethnicity, sexuality, and disability issues, to name a few – the term has recently become an explicit recognition that all systems of oppression must be addressed simultaneously. This recognition is evident in numerous pieces within the symposium, but nowhere more apparent than in the article by Tiffany Nassiri-Ansari, Katindi Sivi, Johanna Riha, and Emma Louise Margaret Rhule. These authors provide a vision of decolonial feminism as a “future direction for liberatory feminist futures”. They remind us of the three key spheres through which coloniality operates – the spheres of power, being, and knowledge – and point out how this impacts people’s capacity to imagine alternative futures. The vision of decolonial feminism as a bridge, on the other hand, provides a “kaleidoscopic narrative” necessary to create such alternatives. This involves engaging with “futures-as-practice”, which asks who gets to practice futures; “futures-as-methods”, which questions why some forms of evidence and knowledge are not valued; and “futures-as-visions”, which inquires into how visions of the future can either dismantle or enhance the “interlinking structures of oppression”. Their vision, like most feminist visions, is “a call to action”. In other words, theories are only useful if they change practices on the ground and transform people’s lived experiences.

And what of our lived experience in the emerging notion of the “new work”, which promises “empowerment, autonomy, and meaningful engagement in the workplace”? While the image of a more “humanised work” indeed promises to benefit many working in a transformed workplace, Anika Keils uses a feminist framework to warn about the dangers of such “gender-blind” visioning. She reminds us that the ability to pursue meaningful and fulfilling “new” work rests on the assumption of privilege – a greater access to resources and opportunities. A feminist framework is thus needed to address deeply entrenched systemic disadvantages caused by gender bias, racial discrimination, and socioeconomic barriers. Going beyond new work requires rooting it in collective agency and care, an approach excellently demonstrated through the application of Causal Layered Analysis for the deconstruction and reconstruction of working arrangements.

That feminist research is relevant for both our societies and ourselves is clearly shown in the essay by Yelena Muzykina. The historical motto of “the personal is political” (and vice versa) is evident in her descriptions of the transformations her society and region have undergone, as well as her own personal journey. Feminism is not a static philosophy; it is concerned with change at multiple levels and embodies a continual search for better states of being. Muzykina offers a rich and in-depth analysis of several discourses highly relevant to women’s liberation and empowerment. Specifically, she analyses the socialist concept of “liberation of women” in general and Soviet feminism in particular, and then contrasts these narratives with Biblical ones. Like so many creative thinkers before her, she advocates for a “third space” and, perhaps surprisingly, finds it in Biblical and Scriptural texts.

The first section of the symposium closes with a truly “WILD” vision for feminist futures. This beautifully written and inspirational piece by Willow Pryor reminds us of the need to continue creating a “fertile and creative inner ecology/landscape within ourselves”. WILD futures are, among other things, interconnected, liminal, and deep. They are transformative, conscious, planetary, visionary, and embodied. Using the metaphor of a womb, Pryor invites us, metaphorically speaking, to engage with “womb knowing”. This means seeing the world from a place of wonder, being open to new possibilities, hearing the voice of maternal wisdom – the voice of love and care for all – and reminding ourselves that we cannot escape our existence as biological beings. Feminist thinking can enable all genders to become truly innovative “futures doulas” – “space holders”, “seers in the dark, illuminating the path forward”.

The nine further Symposium contributions (published in JFS Perspectives section) are equally rich in thematic, generational, and geographical musings. From Esmee Wilcox’s identification as a “generative feminist” transforming futures through the production and use of evidence in policy-making to 17-year-old Joelle Roth’s “young feminist” vision for a more equitable future, we see applications of feminism that are fit for our time, addressing both immediate and long-term futures.

But to create alternative futures, we must also create alternative pasts. Christopher Jones's essay provides an enriched history of his own engagement with the topic of "sisterhood futures" as well as his concerns about younger men's difficulty in grasping the historical transition from "male dominance to rising women's power". His essay is a timely reminder of the work done over the last three decades by him and many of his female and male colleagues who jointly envisioned "SHE and feminist futures" as powerful antidotes to collapse, catastrophe, backlash, and even pessimism.

In a similar vein to Pryor's WILD futures, Sanna Ketonen-Oksi and Tiina Wikström argue for the need for "rebellious girls". Once again, we see feminism defined as "Mother Earth", representing a "holistic view on life, a strive for balance and goodness, and respect for all living beings". Moreover, they envision a multisensory space to address Eurocentrism, white supremacy, inclusion, and exclusion – an approach that promises truly transformative futures.

Another fascinating essay that deals with the Eastern European context is that of Zorana Antonijević. However, she goes far beyond this geographical focus to ask questions such as: "How can we envision a feminist future in a context where the past seems to repeat itself and where more is invested in ... the past instead of imagining the future?" But despite bearing witness to the "acceleration of long-standing trends pertaining to anti-feminist, misogynistic and militaristic politics" and despite previously failed visions, such as "Sweet Dreams" for women of the future, Antonijević summons the courage to provide a blueprint and a vision for 2054, once again inspired by feminism.

The potential of feminist thinking to address a wide range of topics is demonstrated in Steven Lichty's contribution on Quantum Feminist Futures. This approach incorporates numerous insightful elements, including "complexity and uncertainty", "interconnectedness and entanglement", and "intersectionality and fluidity", argues Lichty. The resulting shifts in thinking and behaviour would have significant implications for key issues of our time, such as interconnectedness and the environment, transformative economics, politics of inclusion, cultural shifts in identity and education, and, ultimately, unlocking the potential for rapid social transformation. As before, we hear a request for a "just, equitable future" and "a call to action", reminding us how even the smallest contributions can catalyse profound social shifts.

Three additional topics are addressed in the final three contributions of the symposium, yet again testifying to feminism's enduring relevance and the wide range of issues considered important. Elaine France investigates the futures of women's entrepreneurship using Causal Layered Analysis and scenarios – a "heroine's quest", indeed! She also demonstrates how futures methods can be used for both personal and group empowerment, by outlining possibilities, changing metaphors, and illuminating pathways.

Similarly to the contributions by Digolin and de Assis and Jöster-Morisse, Gillian Young's text presents a "knowledge-based proposition" for feminist international relations, particularly in relation to physical and psychological violence at both micro and macro levels, in public and private spheres. Feminism, as a holistic philosophy, enables systemic analysis, and Young demonstrates how the interconnectedness of various forms of violence can be transformed through collaborative models of policy-making – once again, a recurrent feminist theme.

Susana Hernandez-Toro, Rike Neuhoff, and Kirsten Laugesen Van Dam once again exemplify the participatory nature of feminist discourse creation through a dialogue amongst themselves and also "across generations, cultures, and life experiences". Can motherhood be a source of empowerment and choice rather than being defined by outdated gender roles? How can the weights of the past that prevent motherhood from being defined by equity, community, and connection be minimised? And how can we best embrace the contradictions – the tension of "being stretched between competing demands, expectations, and desires"?

It is a shame that every text – and the symposium is no exception – had a limited amount of space for such important deliberations. Unfortunately, this meant some articles and essays could not be included. The incredibly difficult task of negotiating the feminist principle of inclusion with the material limitations of a journal fell on the shoulders of the two editors of the symposium: Anisah Abdullah and Lavonne Leong. I could not think of two better colleagues to share the journey of feminising futures. The symposium itself was Anisah's idea, and both editors undertook the painstaking work of reviewing submissions and preparing them for publication.

Finally, I would like to extend my gratitude to Ralph Mercer, who kindly reviewed *The Hesitant Feminist's*

Guide to the Future, the anonymous referees who reviewed the submissions, and everyone else who helped the symposium manifest.