INTRODUCTION

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Our lives, on a planetary scale, changed when Covid-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization in early 2020. For many this was a crisis like no other. All living generations were marked by this moment. Our certainties about life, society and nature were all upended. Pandemic waves, lockdowns, social distancing, public health protocols and vaccines dominated our social relations. While the pandemic affected everyone, it impacted on women in a differentiated and disproportionate way. For women in precarious labour market jobs, earning below the minimum wage in the informal economy and in the domestic sphere, life shifted from hard to catastrophic. Drawing on the category of ‘subaltern’ utilised by the Marxist Antonio Gramsci to foreground the history and lived experience of those in the lower rungs of societal hierarchies, this volume does the same for understanding women’s oppression during Covid-19.\(^1\) Put differently, this volume centres subaltern women’s oppression and resistance, as opposed to the reproduction relations of upper-middle-class, elite and wealthy women. Subaltern women’s oppression – among poor, working-class and peasant women – took on a grotesque aspect, and thus placed these women at the centre of the societal crisis of social reproduction. Social reproduction refers to the production of workers and peoples and, more generally, society. It is an invisible process that sits behind and is determined by profit making in production, finance and consumption relations and involves unpaid female labour, public institutions, communities and non-human nature. In the twentieth century different forms of social reproduction regimes with different degrees of state support emerged in the global South and North. However, over the past four decades of financial discipline, precarity and the commodification of everything through neoliberal marketisation, subaltern women have been squeezed in the vice grip of inequality.

In this context, ruling classes scrambled to construct a ‘Covid-19 regime of social reproduction’ to address the suffering of societies. A moment arrived to place human needs before profit making. New economic policy scripts, regulation, support measures for businesses and households, together with public health protocols attempted
to hold societies together and ameliorate the wrenching impacts of economic fallout. Yet major shortcomings and challenges were revealed in a highly unequal world in which women carry the burden. These issues are explored in this volume.

Moreover, the realities of crisis far exceed Covid-19. In fact, the pandemic as a biological disaster merely intersected with a host of cascading crises which have made the already oppressive and tenuous lived realities of women at the grassroots unliveable. Economic precarity, climate shocks, extractivist resource practices, hunger and many other systemic crises are converging. Subaltern women are not merely in a battle to eke out an existence on the margins of society but are trying to preserve life; they face shocks and burdens that threaten to wipe them out. To understand this, the volume challenges social reproduction theory and analysis to revisit its analytical remit. Is it just about understanding the contraction of the welfare state in the global North and its implications for social reproduction, or about precarious working conditions for women, or about highlighting unpaid labour in the household? Does social reproduction theory assist in understanding the total crisis of contemporary capitalism? Can social reproduction theory and analysis enable and further strengthen the necessary world-making role of emancipatory feminism? How does transformative resistance extend and enrich social reproduction theorising? This volume wrestles with these challenges from the standpoint of grassroots women's struggles in South Africa, the larger African context and in the Kurdish world. The scope of this volume was grounded in an appreciation that social reproduction feminism works with universals, recognising that women are not only exploited all over the world but are also oppressed within the realm of social reproduction. What this volume offers is an enquiry about how social reproduction crises and resistance in three spatial contexts can be analysed, theorised and rethought. This is certainly not exhaustive, but South Africa is an interesting case of how feminist organising and politics faltered in the context of institutionalising a shallow market democracy, defined by sharp race, class and gender inequalities. New forms of grassroots feminism are attempting to understand and transform a South Africa in crisis. The larger African context is the terrain of organising for WoMin African Alliance, involved in 13 countries, and actively building women's power around energy and climate justice, against militarisation and for development alternatives. Informed by this positioning, understanding the depth of crisis confronting women on the continent and their responses is crucial. Rojava, in the Kurdish world, is a striking example of how a women-centred paradigm of politics is central to the emancipation project of the Kurdish people; it is about abolishing 5 000 years of patriarchy (a system of male-centred power) and is a ‘women’s revolution.’ This women-centred politics
also works with its own conception of crisis and transformative resistance, which warrants learning from.

At the same time, feminist struggles that existed before Covid-19 intensified during the pandemic. Implicated in the marketisation of societies, for over four decades, has been the hegemony of liberal feminism, in support of techno-financialised capitalism. Yet, its vaunting of upper-middle-class and wealthy women's success stories in a world of economic competition, formal women's rights, gender equality in the marketplace, excessive glamorous and conspicuous consumption and private property has reached its limits. Finding equality within patriarchal capitalism has been a dead end for most women. Liberal feminism has not been transformative and in its shadow new forms of women's counter-hegemonic power and feminist practice have been developing. This has been incubating in ecological, economic and state relations led by grassroots women. In this volume these new practices of emancipatory feminism are explored, including women resisting mining and women in mining; women ensuring national sovereignty is about women's emancipation in the context of ecological and climate justice struggles; food sovereignty pathway building; women in struggles to achieve class mobility through education and skills; women contesting economic relief and ‘build back better’ policy; and women challenging onerous working conditions in the public health-care system. The volume thus highlights an emergent grassroots and subaltern emancipatory feminism, anchored in transformative resistance that seeks to institutionalise new forms of women's power.

In short, this seventh volume in the Democratic Marxism series builds on the concerns and focus of Jacklyn Cock and Meg Luxton, both veteran activists and feminists, who raised the need in volume 1 of the series, *Marxisms in the 21st Century: Crisis, Critique and Struggle*, to find a way forward for the rocky relationship between Marxism and feminism. They argued then that socialist feminism, an independent current within feminism, is crucial for the renewal of feminism. In their view, such a feminism is committed to ensuring that Marxism takes seriously sexism, heterosexism, racism and, more generally, the systemic subordination of women while at the same time challenging feminist thought to integrate an anti-racist class analysis to ensure that the liberation of women is conjoined to the liberation of all people.

**THE COVID-19 CONJUNCTURE**

A pathogen possibly originating from a wild animal changed everything. About 7.7 billion people could not work, attend school, move around and generally could not
be social beings. The structural consequences of this pathogen were unprecedented. It brought the national and global economy to a halt; airlines and shipping were gridlocked; extracted resources could not move and border posts between states were closed. Ruling classes and power structures in this context had to find new modes of ruling. The existential risk to society induced an urgency to protect society. This was the conjunctural significance of Covid-19. Decades of restructuring economies and societies to meet the requirements and needs of capital were suspended (or so it seemed). The competitive and acquisitive individual was no longer more important than our common wellbeing. The rhetoric of care from politicians and rulers seemed to suggest that preserving human life trumped everything else.

In specific countries, patriarchal nationalists, staunch neoliberals and even twenty-first century fascists had to place the exigencies of the public health crisis before their narrow political agendas. This tested the capacity (or lack thereof) of states, economies and society more generally. Decades of undermining public health through austerity, privatisation and mismanagement revealed health inequalities. Economies that have been deeply globalised exposed their limits. Criminalised politicians even had to feign responsiveness to societal need and rapacious looting appetites had to be pushed into the background. However, subaltern women entered the pandemic extremely challenged. Such women have been the main losers under deep globalisation and economic adjustment over the past four decades of neoliberalisation. In the early 1980s the United Nations made the following observations about the plight of women in the world (Peet and Hartwick 1999: 164): women make up half the world’s population, perform two-thirds of the world’s working hours, receive one-tenth of the world’s income and own only one-hundredth of the world’s property.

After more than four decades of neoliberal restructuring of the global economy and the remaking of states as enablers of the sovereignty of capital, subaltern women continue to face a desperate situation of gender inequality. According to Oxfam, this desperate situation is manifest in:

- Low wages: across the world, women are in the lowest-paid work. Globally, they earn 24 per cent less than men and at the current rate of progress, it will take 170 years to close the gap. There are 700 million fewer women than men in paid work.
- Lack of decent work: 75 per cent of women in developing regions are in the informal economy, where they are less likely to have employment contracts, legal rights or social protection, and are often not paid enough to escape
poverty. Six hundred million women are in the most insecure and precarious forms of work.

- Unpaid care work: women do at least twice as much unpaid care work, such as childcare and housework, as men – sometimes ten times as much, often in addition to their paid work. The value of this work each year is estimated to be at least US$10.8 trillion – more than three times the size of the global tech industry.

- Longer workdays: women work longer days than men when paid and unpaid work is counted together. That means globally, a young woman today will work on average the equivalent of four years more than a man over her lifetime.

South Africa mirrors many of these dynamics of gender-based exploitation, exclusion and oppression. Pioneering and important social reproduction analyses, done over the past two decades, bring this into focus in relation to households and communities, highlighting African working-class women as the ‘shock absorbers’ of the crisis of social reproduction. During the initial pandemic lockdown in 2020, about four million women (including domestic workers) in the informal economy lost income-earning opportunities overnight. Moreover, African working-class women continued to be the most vulnerable, with a 41 per cent unemployment rate in 2021 – higher than any other population group. Such subaltern women, oppressed by patriarchal relations, were forced to cook, clean and provide care labour for more family members during lockdown, and where meagre incomes existed these were spread more thinly (including from state support programmes) as increases in food prices registered. According to a Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Group report, in late 2021 an essential food basket for a low-income household of seven members cost on average R4 275.94 per month. The minimum wage of a full-time domestic worker is approximately R3 207.12, assuming a wage of R19.09 per hour (and many domestic workers do not earn nearly as much as this) (PMBEJD 2021: 1). The hunger squeeze on poor and working-class households intensified during Covid-19. Violence against women in South Africa escalated. In 2016, South Africa had the fourth highest female interpersonal violence death rate out of 183 countries. Contrast this with the global female homicide rate in 2019, which was 2.3 per 100 000 of the global population; in South Africa the rate was a staggering 10.1 per 100 000. During the first three weeks of lockdown in 2020, the government’s Gender-Based Violence and Femicide Command Centre received over 120 000 cases and the Foundation for Human Rights suggested a 54 per cent increase in gender-based violence.
At a global level, a United Nations Women study on care and domestic work conducted between April 2020 and November 2020, involving 47 countries, found the realities shown in Table 0.1.

Essentially, 60 per cent of women reported an increase in care work compared to 40 per cent of men. The Philippines was the outlier, where 80 per cent of men reported an increase in unpaid domestic work while only 62 per cent of women said the same. Moreover, 28 per cent of women said the intensity of care work increased, while only 16 per cent of men said the same. Finally, 64 per cent of parents observed a high involvement of girl children in household chores (UN Women n.d.).

Similarly, the International Labour Organization (2021: 4) observed that women in the world faced the following situation during the pandemic:

The disruption to labour markets has had devastating consequences for both men and women, yet women’s employment declined by 5 per cent in 2020 compared with 3.9 per cent for men … A cross-cutting issue affecting women in all countries, sectors, occupations and types of employment is that the burden of intensified childcare and home-schooling activities has disproportionately fallen on them, leading to a rise in unpaid working time for women that reinforces traditional gender roles. Moreover, women often work in front-line occupations, such as care workers or grocery clerks, that face elevated health risks and difficult working conditions.

Breaking the glass ceiling in job-shedding economies and precarious labour markets has certainly not been a concern in this conjuncture of deep systemic crisis for subaltern women. Public policy debates about bringing the state back in to address

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### Table 0.1: Unpaid care and domestic work in households during 2020

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<tr>
<th>Chore</th>
<th>Women (%)</th>
<th>Men (%)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Increase in cooking and serving meals</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t usually cook or serve a meal</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in cleaning</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in repairs and household management</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased time for pet care</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in caring for children</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in teaching children</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in playing with children</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>28</td>
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the crisis of social reproduction by ensuring adequate socio-economic mitigation has loomed large across the world. How states should use their resources to protect their societies from harm during the pandemic has become a crucial debate. How should recovery happen to benefit the most vulnerable? By January 2021, in aggregate, governments in different parts of the world had injected US$14 trillion into economic support, with the US having the largest injection of $2.2 trillion (Tooze 2021: 473). Several policy positions have emerged to construct a state-supported Covid-19 social reproduction regime, including arguments for gender mainstreaming in pandemic budgets, a universal basic income/grant/guarantee, income transfers for unpaid labour, increased spending on health care, increased wages for essential services workers, opening the food commons through solidarity and food sovereignty and democratising power. However, while governments have deployed various socio-economic mitigation measures, these have been uneven, inadequate and generally the situation on a world scale has continued to be disastrous. For global monopoly capital, particularly digital, financial and agricultural, profit rates continued to increase and wealth further concentrated at the top. Mainstream pandemic economics has really been about widening inequality, including gender-based inequality.

HEGEMONIC LIBERAL FEMINISM IN THE WORLD AND SOUTH AFRICA

With the global shift to neoliberalism in the 1980s, corporate boardroom feminism and, more broadly, feminism of upper-middle-class and wealthy liberal women, became dominant. The neoliberal class project of entrenching financial discipline in states and societies articulated with several social issues in a manner that did not question the systemic roots of oppression but reinforced its hegemony. Breaking the glass ceiling, having more skirts in boardrooms and on chairs, more women CEOs and political leaders, private property rights for peasant women in the global South, deregulating labour markets to create precarious jobs for women, equal rights before the law and generally more women in patriarchal command centres of techno-financialised capitalism became the rallying cry. Feminist issues became wealthy women’s issues and vice versa.

By the fourth decade of neoliberalisation, the world was restructured and remade in the image of US-led transnational capital. We were all living in a global capitalist civilisation with the white male, homo-economicus, as our civilisational standard; everybody needed to become a businessperson, an entrepreneur and
ultimately a capitalist. Liberal feminism was centrally implicated in this process of civilisation making and contributing to a highly individuated and market-centred political subject; it has been the handmaiden to a form of deleterious financialised techno capitalism. At the same time, Donald Trump and a slew of authoritarian neoliberals ascended into power. This posed a dilemma for feminism internationally: break with liberal feminism and a rising authoritarian neoliberal feminism or remain trapped. This came to the fore sharply in several women's strikes in 2016, 2017 and 2018 which, in different parts of the world, sought to resist exclusionary nationalism and the neoliberal attack on decent work, health care, pensions, housing, education and public transport (Arruzza et al. 2019). In the heat of these struggles, hegemonic liberal feminism was critically scrutinised, critiqued and rejected. In essence, the critique asserted was this:

Fully compatible with ballooning inequality, liberal feminism outsources oppression. It permits professional-managerial women to lean in precisely by enabling them to lean on the poorly paid migrant women to whom they subcontract their caregiving and housework. Insensitive to class and race, it links our cause with elitism and individualism. Projecting feminism as a ‘stand-alone’ movement, it associates us with policies that harm the majority and cuts us off from struggles that oppose those policies. In short, liberal feminism gives feminism a bad name. (Arruza et al. 2019: 37–38)

South African feminists face the same dilemma regarding a hegemonic liberal feminism that has not worked for the many. According to the Wikipedia entry on feminism in South Africa, this concerns ‘the organised efforts to improve the rights of girls and women in South Africa’. It goes on in this vein, even providing a sanitised version of women’s struggles and reducing them to racial and gender equality, suffrage and equal pay for men and women. This is quintessential liberal feminism appropriating feminism in South Africa. Moreover, liberal feminists trumpet how many legal rights have been won. For Jen Thorpe (2018), women have a barrage of laws and rights in the new South Africa and all that is needed is to improve state implementation capacity. While this holds some truth, it falls short in explaining how the post-apartheid neoliberal political economy has undermined these rights and made them inaccessible to most subaltern women. Moreover, liberal feminism has also been explicit in vaunting the leap through the glass ceiling as a model – a standard-bearer – for women more generally in South African society. A collection of essays, *Feminism Is: South Africans Speak Their Truth*, attempts to universalise the experience and politics of privileged, professional middle-class
women as feminism. While it celebrates diverse racial experiences, it is unsatisfying in how it occludes the lived realities that the majority of subaltern women face within the exclusionary practices of patriarchal and globalised South African capitalism. However, in reality this feminism, as part of the neoliberal class project, has become the dominant type of feminism we see promulgated in the mainstream. It is in crisis together with the capitalist status quo it wants to be part of and which it defends.

So how did liberal feminism, even its black variants, with its emphasis on class mobility, conspicuous acquisition, institutional representation and legal rights become the dominant feminism in South Africa? It certainly was not inevitable or predetermined, given the radical histories of resistance by subaltern women in South Africa – from resisting high rents, opposing pass laws (such as the powerful women’s march to government buildings in Pretoria on 9 August 1956), engaging in student protests, strengthening and leading mass organisations to building trade unions and establishing women’s grassroots organisations. Several historical conditions explain this. First, the hegemonic place of Marxist and socialist feminism in the 1970s and 1980s, which provided crucial intellectual resources through conceptual approaches that linked gender oppression to race, class and capitalism, was simultaneously buoyed by the strength of mass politics and a radical intelligentsia, including feminist theorists. In South Africa’s transition to democracy the deradicalisation of mass politics, including through demobilising the United Democratic Front, and co-opting trade unionists, civic leaders and communists into state institutions (including parliament, administration and local government), contributed to eviscerating a radical impulse for change from below. Academics also slid into a post-modern register and mode of thinking about the world, and identity politics became fashionable. In this context, Marxist and socialist feminism lost ground in the everyday lives of subaltern women. Second, the normalcy of a market democracy as the terrain for feminist struggle locked in how women’s rights were constitutionalised. For instance, the National Women’s Coalition championing the Women’s Charter, the creation of the Commission of Gender Equality (a constitutional statutory body), the creation of the Office of the Status of Women and the joint Parliamentary Committee on the Quality of Life and Status of Women failed to transition into a mass movement of ongoing resistance championed by subaltern women. As many feminists have observed, this was the high point of collective and national-level mass women’s organising in the post-apartheid period and the state–women’s movement relation that developed undermined the capacity for mass-based women’s organising from below. Third, the shift to deep globalisation and neoliberalisation after 1996 signalled a shift to deracialising capitalism as the
dominant national liberation project. Black economic empowerment transactions and ‘two economies’ discourse merely reinforced the importance of capitalist accumulation as the means to liberation, even for women. In this context, Thabo Mbeki affirmed a liberal gender representation politics as central to both the state and the economy. However, hegemonic liberal feminism with all its claims, gestures and performative assertions has not contributed to changing the lives of the vast majority of subaltern women. Its own functionalism and legitimating role for deep globalisation and the neoliberal class project have contributed to creating an unequal, desperate and unviable society, giving rise to social conservatism, revanchist and nativist nationalism and explicit expressions of misogyny and patriarchy in the mainstream of South African society. The rise of Jacob Zuma, and his brand of African masculinity and patriarchy, the sexist practices of political parties, trade unions and community organisations and, more generally, the war on women in South African society cannot be separated from the role hegemonic liberal feminism played in the making of a crisis-ridden market democracy. This pattern is not unique to South Africa, with inequality breeding reaction. The rise of extreme right-wing politics, married to religious fundamentalism, patriarchy and exclusionary nationalism, is expressing itself in the USA, Europe, Brazil, India and in many other parts of the world. Liberal feminism helped engender this. It is now in crisis together with the societies it has tried to make in its own image as part of a globalised, marketised and mass consumption capitalism.

THE RETURN OF SOCIAL REPRODUCTION THEORY

It is commonplace to periodise feminism and from most accounts it has gone through three waves: the late nineteenth century, shaped by the rise of mass labour movements and workers’ parties wrestling with classical Marxism and the women’s question, the suffragettes struggling for the right to vote and the Russian Revolution. The second wave, from the 1960s till the early 1980s, involved the rise of socialist feminism with its critique of classical Marxism – particularly its failure to fully appreciate the salience of women’s work and the sexual division of labour; radical feminism, with its emphasis on lived experience and patriarchy as the basis of women’s oppression; liberal feminism, with its emphasis on gender equality within capitalism; and Third World liberation struggle approaches to the women’s question. A third wave in the late 1980s has been marked by hegemonic liberal feminism, post-modernism and eco-feminism. As mentioned, hegemonic liberal feminism
championed the class mobility of elite and wealthy women into the centres of globalising capitalism and validated a shallow form of gender and race equality: equality in the market, in the boardroom and in the wealthy family. Post-modern feminism rejected universals like class exploitation and meta-narratives and merely validated the identities and role of particularist feminisms, issue-centred intersectional politics and performative populism. Eco-feminism, emerging during second-wave feminism, found its moorings through providing a decolonial and subaltern feminist critique of the ecologies of capital, eschewing catch-up modernisation and affirming an eco-feminist politics of subsistence and indigenous knowledge.

In the ferment of this ideological landscape, social reproduction theory (SRT), rooted in Marxist and socialist feminism, has made a comeback as part of a fourth wave of feminism. It emerges out of the crises of global capitalist restructuring (using debt in the global South, austerity and precarity in the labour market in the global North), in resistance to the emergence of extreme right-wing politics, and through living during a time of a global pandemic. In general terms, social reproduction relates to life making in relation to the biological reproduction of our species (sex), the material existence of the working class (household income) and care labour (for instance, child rearing, cooking, cleaning, taking care of the elderly) within a gendered division of labour. The lack of a coherent and fully articulated conceptualisation of production and social reproduction in Marx’s and Engels’ work led to the development of SRT. It first made its appearance in first-wave feminism amongst Marxist feminists seeking to understand the ‘double burden’ facing women as workers and wives. During the Russian Revolution, Alexandra Kollontai went the furthest to argue that addressing childcare and the transformation of the family was a necessary precondition to achieving equality of the sexes and socialism (Bryson 2005: 131). In second-wave feminism, SRT found its place in socialist feminist theorising (Cakardic 2020). On the one hand, socialist feminists theorised home-based work as creating value and as actually unpaid labour. On the other, a more unitary theory emerged, recognising domestic labour as creating use values to meet needs, but at the same time appreciating production and reproduction as connected. Thus in second-wave feminism, domestic labour contributed crucially to reproducing the entire capitalist system and the working class. Women’s oppression was wired into structural relations and was not a simple add-on to capitalism. Today SRT is making a comeback. Several important interventions are bringing it to the fore through repositioning a Marxist/socialist-inspired feminism in relation to feminism in general. Such attempts include revisiting the ‘unhappy marriage’ of Marxism and feminism (Mojab 2015), Marxist feminists rejecting liberal feminist hegemony and shallow intersectionality feminism to ‘go it alone’
politically (Bhattacharya 2017), and finding the place of SRT in ‘dangerous liaisons’ in actual struggles (Fakier et al. 2020).

**RETHINKING SOCIAL REPRODUCTION AND EMANCIPATORY FEMINISM**

Feminism has never been static and has changed under variegated historical and socio-ecological conditions. It is important to recognise the context in which social reproduction theory is making a return as part of the fourth wave of feminism. At the same time, organic emancipatory feminism is informed by the shortcomings of hegemonic liberal feminism, as well as lived experience, resistance and struggles for systemic alternatives to capitalism’s total crisis. What it expresses is the following:

- Critical lessons have been learned from previous waves of feminism for theory and struggle to overcome all oppressions faced by women.
- In confronting patriarchal capitalism and its crises of socio-ecological reproduction, it is converging around Marxist, socialist, ecological and indigenous feminisms with an anti-capitalist and, more specifically, a democratic eco-socialist imaginary. It is seeking to build genuine universal subaltern solidarity, in opposition to capitalist oppression, while recognising the particularities of culture and identity.
- It is decolonising in its resistance to white supremacy and Euro-American modernity while recognising that democracy – procedural, institutional and rights – does not belong to capitalism but is the product of a people’s history of struggle going back to ancient times of sharing the commons, resisting slavery, revolutions, anti-colonial struggles, cooperative movement building, traditions of worker control and digital commoning. It seeks to expand and deepen democracy.
- In its desires and visions for subaltern women-led transformation it is constitutive of power from below and works at different scales to build mass movements that will drive democratic systemic reforms to advance political projects capable of overcoming patriarchal capitalism while building the next society in the present. In this sense it expresses a new form of transformative resistance, different from lobbying, symbolic protest and seeking identity recognition.

The chapters that follow capture different aspects of this emergent emancipatory feminism and its relationship to social reproduction theoretical analyses.
INDIGENOUS EMANCIPATORY FEMINISM AND TRANSFORMATIVE RESISTANCE

Samantha Hargreaves, in chapter 1, places the concept of extractivist patriarchal capitalism at the centre of her analysis. She brings to the fore multiple and interconnected systemic crisis dynamics shaping the lives of peasant and African working-class women on the African continent. She demonstrates how the crisis of climate and ecology, debt and financial flows from Africa, the rise of pandemics (including Ebola), war displacement and violence against women are all imbricated in the making of extractivist patriarchal capitalism. The flip side of this reality is a general crisis of social reproduction facing unpaid women labour in peasant and working-class households on the continent; they carry the burden of all these crises. Far from surrendering to the dystopian and unliveable realities facing women on the continent, Hargreaves highlights the axes of eco-feminist ideological renewal crucial to advance decolonisation and dreams of African alternatives to ‘build back better’ coming out of Covid-19. With grounded insights from the work of WoMin African Alliance, she underlines the importance of customary relationships with land and nature, the philosophical importance of ubuntu for remaking the human–nature relationship and the importance of reclaiming pan-Africanism by drawing on its radical intellectual roots. This is an emancipatory feminism in the making.

Hawzhin Azeez, in chapter 2, amplifies the critique of liberal feminism by situating it in relation to Eurocentricism, the making of capitalist patriarchy and imperialism. She demonstrates how liberal feminist political leaders in various parts of the world also failed in their responses to Covid-19, particularly in relation to the subaltern other. As an alternative emancipatory feminism she highlights jineology, a feminism central to the Kurdish struggle in the Middle East, particularly Rojava in Northern Syria. As a grassroots approach to feminism, jineology derives from the thought of Abdulla Ocalan and is central to the practice of ‘democratic confederalism’ in Kurdish territory. The collective and social ecology emphasis of jineology is a living, counter-hegemonic example to the elitism and exclusionary practices of liberal feminism. Azeez demonstrates how this works in Rojava and how it has made a practical difference in how women have played a central role in the response to Covid-19 and the challenges of social production it brought to the fore. Food-producing cooperatives, mask making, tree planting, defence, education and awareness-raising have all been led by women. The flourishing of this feminism has been a deliberate process of raising consciousness through intensive political education and ensuring women’s power
prevails in all spheres of Kurdish struggles for emancipation. Put more sharply, jineology means Kurdish emancipation is either feminist or it is nothing.

ECOLOGY AND TRANSFORMATIVE WOMEN’S POWER IN SOUTH AFRICA

Inge Konik, in chapter 3, provides an overview of some central differences between materialist ecological feminism and liberal feminism. This overview and juxtaposition critically highlights the main preoccupations of liberal feminism as it relates to a hyper individualism and single-issue politics and a consumption feminist image. On the other hand, eco-feminism emerges from the 1970s grassroots struggle to defend non-human nature and has a more holistic understanding of humans-in-nature; provides a critique of capitalist patriarchy as it oppresses both natural relations and women; and furnishes a non-economistic and ecological approach to caregiving in the process of social reproduction. In short, Konik sheds light on why materialist ecological feminism is better equipped than liberal feminism both to analyse and to resist the exploitative practices of neoliberal capitalism. The capacity of each movement to address contemporary social and ecological challenges such as Covid-19 is shaped by important epistemological differences between them. Konik explores these issues through highlighting crucial lessons for eco-feminism and more generally emancipatory feminism.

Dineo Skosana and Jacklyn Cock, in chapter 4, explore the lived realities and struggles of African working-class women in two mining-affected communities. Rich in empirical insights, they explore an African eco-feminist practice with due sensitivity to how women in these communities understand socially constructed gender relations. In theorising from this they provide a rigorous analysis about women as shock absorbers of the multidimensional crisis created by Covid-19, pollution and climate shocks. They also explore the complexities, ambiguities and challenges of building grassroots resistance. Finally, they assess the role of WoMin and the Rural Women’s Assembly in advancing and developing an African eco-feminism based on the lived experience, struggles and solidarity-based movement-building practices they champion at the grassroots. This chapter gives meaning to the idea of ‘our existence is resistance’.

Courtney Morgan and Jane Cherry, in chapter 5, utilise an eco-socialist feminist lens to explore the intersection of the Covid-19 lockdown, hunger and the role that women play in the transition to food sovereignty through their transformative practices. The chapter situates the international itinerary of food sovereignty, its
history and its emergence as an alternative system to address hunger through La Via Campesina, an international grassroots feminist farmers’ organisation. This perspective is extended into the South African context to highlight the campaigning work of the South African Food Sovereignty Campaign before and during Covid-19. Given that hunger is central to the crisis of social reproduction, this chapter highlights food sovereignty as power, as a response to the gendered powerlessness of hunger. The chapter provides crucial insights into how food sovereignty can be used to address this crisis in a way that empowers women. Through the interviews they conducted, the authors place in the spotlight South African women who are not only talking about food sovereignty but also employing its practices in their everyday lives to alleviate hunger and build new food sovereignty systems in their communities. The women profiled in this chapter wield power in four meaningful ways: movement power, structural power, direct power and symbolic power.

ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION, PUBLIC SERVICES AND TRANSFORMATIVE WOMEN’S POWER IN SOUTH AFRICA

Asanda Benya, in chapter 6, explores the role of women in mining. She explores this question historically and in relation to contemporary platinum mining. The discursive delegitimising of women in mining and their controversial inclusion is the starting point for this chapter. The androcentric arguments against the inclusion of women in mining are interrogated while the reasoning for the inclusion of black male bodies is juxtaposed as part of the making of a patriarchal and racist mining capitalism. However, given the androcentric hegemony within the division of labour within the mining process, Benya explores how the marginality of women in mining has become a source of autonomous agency to resist incorporation into a male and racist conception of mining labour practice. She highlights numerous ‘strategic refusals’ including leaving stopes and negotiating work, rejecting fanakalo (a language spoken by male mineworkers) and ‘honorary citizenship’, and contesting naming and union membership. This is pathbreaking ethnographic work which shows that African working-class women in mining are reaching for more than liberal equality in the workplace.

Jane Mbithi-Dikgole, in chapter 7, provides a perspective of class and social mobility amongst African women in South Africa. Through qualitative research, she explores middle-class and working-class African women entrepreneurs’ career aspirations and labour market choices to assess how this impacts on social mobility. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 103 African women entrepreneurs located in
three provinces in South Africa (Gauteng, Mpumalanga and Limpopo), she provides rich research material that shows women’s class location has enduring effects on their future work expectations and social mobility. Social class, like gender, generates meanings and expectations that influence women’s perceptions of the opportunities available to them. The central aim of this chapter is to explore how race, class and gender affect the labour market decisions of African women, and how this triple oppression has been used to understand the conditions of African women. Class location affects an individual’s life choices as life contexts shape women’s expectations about work prospects and ultimately shape their lives and social mobility probabilities. Mbithi-Dikgole shows how class location influences labour market choices and employment beliefs and further situates these lived realities against liberal feminism. Ultimately this chapter argues that the crisis of social reproduction disadvantages African women as the gendered division of labour is constructed and maintained in various ways. This crisis means more oppression for African working-class women.

Sonia Phalatse and Busi Sibeko, in chapter 8, unpack the relationship between social reproduction and fiscal policy in the context of crisis and post-crisis recovery. The authors discuss the role of fiscal policy in addressing the crisis of social reproduction which has been shaped by the trajectory of capital accumulation in South Africa. They argue that the government’s Covid-19 fiscal response was inadequate, punitive to women, and is exacerbating existing structural inequalities. The Supplementary Budget austerity measures disproportionately affected women as they bear the major part of the burden of social reproduction. They therefore require greater and easier access to public services, but austerity takes that away. These austerity measures were further reinforced in the 2020 Medium Term Budget Policy Statement. Constrictive fiscal policies that have prioritised debt stabilisation at the expense of developing a comprehensive social provisioning policy – which has only deepened since the onset of the global pandemic – have locked in the economy to austerity policies that have worsened conditions for working-class women. A post-Covid-19 economic recovery will require undertaking a state-led expansionary fiscal policy that restores greater investments in social infrastructure, particularly care infrastructure. In this context, it is important to develop tactics to address the crisis of social reproduction in a manner that reprioritises care and decentres profit. This means the South African economy will need to structurally transform to ensure that a number of intersecting inequalities are reversed.

In chapter 9, Christine Bischoff focuses on nurses as part of the health-care workforce, and explicates the idea that paid health-care work is a form of social
reproductive labour. Care work describes spheres of work that are usually feminised and comprise the nurturing of others. Many nurses are from poor working-class backgrounds. In South Africa, the dual health-care system persists and there is inequality in the distribution of resources between the private and public health-care sectors. Typically black and female, health-care workers are poorly treated and this impacts on the quality of health-care services offered. Their working conditions are poor: nurses work for long hours, receive low pay and have many financial dependents. There is an increasing casualisation amongst the health-care workforce and nurses are also at risk of being victims of violence in the workplace, as there are chronic nursing staff shortages. Their working conditions became even more dire during Covid-19, since nurses are part of the frontline service personnel who were most at risk of infection and passing that risk on to their families and dependents. Ineffectual trade union responses and austerity measures in the public sector only exacerbate the crisis of social reproduction.

WHERE TO FOR EMANCIPATORY FEMINISM?

While this volume highlights an emergent emancipatory feminism and its transformative forms of resistance and potentials, it also opens up ways of rethinking SRT and modes of doing transformative politics to realise emancipatory feminism, as part of a fourth wave of feminism confronting the total crisis of contemporary capitalism. However, this journey is fraught with challenges. Central to the realisation of emancipatory feminism is the convergence between Marxist, socialist, ecological and indigenous feminisms. This volume demonstrates that it is possible. At the same time, there is a need for dialogue with intersectional feminism. Vishwas Satgar, in chapter 10, engages with these issues. He highlights the dominant modes of Marxist-feminist social reproduction theoretical analysis that have emerged as part of the fourth wave of feminism. While embracing this conceptual approach, he also highlights three crucial problems with Marxist social reproduction analysis that need to be addressed in order to take on board the total or civilisational crisis of contemporary capitalism. This includes a need to appreciate that the systemic crisis tendencies and contradictions of contemporary capitalism are registering as crisis in everything. The dividing lines between background and foreground conditions are blurring as the system reveals its failings, vulnerabilities and limits. Moreover, ecology has to be central to how social reproduction theory and analysis is put to work. This requires a revisit of Marx’s
ecology, his conception of the human and the important contributions of ecological feminism. From this perspective it might be more appropriate to think of ‘green’ social reproduction theory as socio-ecological reproduction theory. Another crucial challenge is to clarify the role of intersectionality and Marxist oppression analysis within such a framework. The chapter concludes with a focus on how conceptualising the social reproduction crisis as socio-ecological crises complements emancipatory feminism while highlighting challenges that have to be overcome for such a feminism to flourish.

NOTES
1 During 1934, in Mussolini’s prison, Antonio Gramsci in his Prison Notebook 25 specifies the concept of the subaltern as referring to slaves, peasants, women, different races and the proletariat as subordinate social groups. As Green (2011: 66) highlights, the usage in the Prison Notebooks is cryptic but relates to Gramsci’s interest in producing a methodology of subaltern history, a history of subaltern classes and a political strategy based on the subaltern. These concerns are also central to a subaltern emancipatory feminism.
3 Fakier and Cock (2009) explore dynamics of physical and emotional care labour as unpaid care labour in a poor working-class community, Mosoetsa (2011) explicates the dynamics of survival in working-class female-headed households and Williams (2018) foregrounds the struggles of women in rural South Africa in the context of a post-wage existence.
4 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FeminisminSouthAfrica.
5 A similar volume with a misleading title, given the high-profiled women it celebrates, is Engelbrecht and Tywakadi’s (2020) Forgotten Women: The South African Story.
6 In this regard see Bozzioli (1983), who explores the conceptual challenges and problems with some of the Marxist approaches to feminism in South Africa that developed during the 1960s and 1970s.
7 Amongst others, see Horn (1995), Hassim (2005) and Meintjes (2011).
8 Hassim (2014) provides an important critical analysis of the limits of quotas and gender-based representational politics in local government.
9 See Fakier and Cock (2009), Mosoetsa (2011) and Williams (2018).
10 This critique is developed further by other contributors to this volume.
11 See Williams and Satgar (2021), Volume 6 in the Democratic Marxism series, entitled Destroying Democracy: Neoliberal Capitalism and the Rise of Authoritarian Politics, which explores these issues. Also see Panitch et al’s (2021) Socialist Register 2022, in which analyses focus on these issues as well.
12 The work of Silvia Federici (2021), within second-wave feminism and now, has been crucial in drawing attention to women’s unpaid reproductive labour within the gender division of labour underpinning the realm of social reproduction, including the notion of the ‘patriarchy of the wage’.
An International Wages for Housework Campaign developed out of this analysis in the early 1970s. Silvia Federici was one of the socialist feminists involved with this campaign.

REFERENCES


Horn, P. 1995. ‘Where is feminism now?’, *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* 26: 71–74.


