Emancipatory Feminism in the Time of Covid-19

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PART TWO

ECOLOGY AND TRANSFORMATIVE WOMEN’S POWER IN SOUTH AFRICA
INTRODUCTION

Feminism, in any of its manifestations, can be regarded as a positive development since it aims to validate and serve the interests of that half of human beings, namely women, who have historically experienced subordination based on their socio-sexual differences from men. Sexual discrimination against women remains a constant challenge, and is experienced by many women, from a multiplicity of contexts and cultures, throughout their lives. That said, at this socially and ecologically precarious juncture, feminism must deliberately address itself to myriad complex problems facing women – and indeed human civilisation as a whole – including unprecedented phenomena such as Covid-19. But not all is equal among feminisms when it comes to meeting this demand, as the limits of liberal feminism at this point are clearly showing. This chapter attempts to demonstrate as much through contrasting liberal feminism with materialist ecological feminism, paying special attention to differences between their epistemological frameworks, as these differences speak to their differing capacities for facilitating multidimensional emancipation today.

The feminist movement is said to have started during the French and American Revolutions of the late 1700s, continuing through the emergence of first-wave feminism in the 1920s among suffragettes and others, and resulting in second-wave feminism that began in the 1960s. And of the various types of feminism that have emerged since then, ‘liberal feminism is the most widely known form of feminist
thought ... often seen as synonymous with feminism *per se* (Beasley 1999: 51). It is also ‘the most commonly borrowed ... approach in the feminist pantheon’ (Beasley 1999: 53). This is possibly ‘because liberal feminism is the most moderate feminist ideology, [since] adherence to its basic principles serves as a minimal criterion to assess whether an individual is a feminist’ (Carroll 1994: 140). Broadly conceived, this type of feminism seeks to dispel the myth that women are less capable than men of assuming influential roles in the public and private sectors. Indeed, over time, liberal feminists, as well as women generally, have amply demonstrated their capacity for and ability to be ‘equivalent’ to men in governance, business, education, and so on. Increasingly, too, women have been making their own opportunities in such contexts instead of waiting for institutional backing or any man’s ‘permission’ to do so, including in some cases using their sexual power to gain ascendency over men (McGee 2012: 228, 230).

On the other hand, ecological feminism, while similarly emphasising women’s struggles, has different roots, epistemological commitments and aims from those of liberal feminism. Rather than growing out of middle-class liberal feminism, eco-feminism originated as a grassroots movement among women focused on environmental problems. This focus constitutes its organic starting point, implying that subsequent academic attempts to explain it as a ‘feminism’ can be at least partially attributed to theorists feeling obliged to refer to existing paradigms. Further, like liberal feminism, eco-feminism is a variegated movement as it ‘draws on many feminisms’ (Mellor 1992: 45). Thus, ‘eco-feminists [can] range from New Age thinkers to socialists’, and the movement might be read ‘as embodying variants of cultural or radical feminism [or constituting] ... a neo-Marxian socialism’ (Mellor 1992: 45; see also Salleh 1991: 130). The version of eco-feminism under discussion in this chapter is a ‘materialist’ one – a socialist form of this movement. Yet, unlike socialism, materialist eco-feminism is rooted in embodied materialism. It ‘is “embodied” because it enfolds into the analysis of production, an ethic of care-centred reproductive labour ... And it is “materialist” because it argues that “the subordination of women and the degradation of the natural world are historically and materially related”’ (Odih 2014: lxxiii–lxxiv).

In this chapter, it is advanced that eco-feminism’s pragmatic grounding in everyday contexts profoundly influences its epistemology – giving the movement greater capacity than liberal feminism for dealing with contemporary challenges such as Covid-19. The South African feminist scholars and activists Khayaat Fakier and Jacklyn Cock touch on this, arguing that ‘exploring alternatives and developing analytical and strategic capacities for collective action grounded in the material and daily realities of working-class people is where a revolutionary
potential lies’ (Fakier and Cock 2018: 42). Keeping the trajectory of this argument in mind, it is time to consider liberal feminism in more detail, including materialist eco-feminists’ and others’ criticisms of it. This will provide a clear silhouette of eco-feminism, allowing the reader to begin to sense how the two movements differ. Moreover, it could help dispel any negative associations that some people might have with anything labelled feminist precisely because of liberal feminism, which is, with good reason, regarded as promoting a ‘competitive, individualistic ethic’ and ‘protecting and advancing the interests of [largely] white, middle-class women’ (Fakier and Cock 2018: 50).

THE LIMITS OF LIBERAL FEMINISM

Accounts of the emergence of liberal feminism vary but at base, ‘liberal feminism is grounded squarely on an acceptance … [that i]f individuals are rational in the required sense, their physical structure and appearance are unimportant’, and women accordingly should be afforded the same opportunities as men, as rational human beings (Jaggar 1983: 37). While this is a valid point, what is problematic is that ‘the liberal conception of rationality is … conceived as a property of individuals rather than of groups’ (Jaggar 1983: 28). This sees liberal feminism ineluctably caught up in the logical unfolding of the capitalist ideology of liberal individualism. Indeed, liberal feminism’s continued complicity with the capitalist status quo is forcefully criticised by the German materialist eco-feminist Maria Mies: ‘While many of us would agree that our enemy is capitalist patriarchy as a system, and not just men, we cannot deny that many feminists do not even talk of capitalism … Others only want more equality with men, … and do not even aspire to transcend capitalist patriarchy as a system’ (Mies 1986[1998]: 1). But not only eco-feminists have commented on liberal feminism’s uncritical attitude towards capitalism: the sociologist Christopher Thorpe, for example, similarly suggests that liberal feminism lacks genuinely emancipatory potential. He maintains that ‘in the continuum of forms of feminist thought, liberal feminism is the least radical … [as t]he aim of liberal feminists is to eradicate gender inequalities through reform rather than revolution – reform of existing patriarchal structures and institutions, political policies and cultural forms’ (Thorpe 2018). In other words, liberal feminist women tend to follow in the well-trodden tracks of the existing politico-economic framework, seeking power and equal opportunity in highly exploitative institutions and entities embedded in the neoliberal system. Why this is not seen as problematic to a liberal feminist, is because ‘liberal feminism … does not link female oppression directly to
the institution of private property and/or the nature and functioning of advanced
capitalism’ (Valentich and Gripton 2016: 1–2).

Related to the latter is another limitation of liberal feminism: it fosters single-
issue pluralism insofar as liberal feminists tend to treat their politics as separate from
worker struggles, environmentalism and black politics, for example. Accordingly,
they are prone to what American feminist and critical theorist Nancy Fraser describes
as ‘identity politics‘ – something which ‘scarcely fosters social interaction across dif-
f erences [and] on the contrary … encourages separatism and group enclaves’ (Fraser
2000: 113). Such dynamics, Fraser adds, ‘serve not to promote respectful interac-
tion within increasingly multicultural contexts, but to drastically simplify and reify
group identities’ (Fraser 2000: 108). This goes some way towards explaining why the
eco-feminist Ynestra King holds that ‘the version of feminism least able to appropri-
ately address ecology is liberal feminism[: … a [predominantly] white middle-class
movement, concerned with the extension of male power and privilege to women like
themselves, not the fate of women as a whole‘ (King 1990: 119). King adds that ‘to the
extent that they address ecological concerns, liberal feminists will be “environmental-
talists” rather than “ecologists”, in an “environmental management” sense of the term,
where the aim is “to make sure that … [natural] resources are not depleted to a degree
that slows human productivity’ (King 1990: 120).

A primary aim of liberal feminism, then, is to facilitate women’s full participation
in the existing economic system rather than undermining it on the grounds of its
unadulterated exploitation of workers, the environment, most women and the disen-
franchised peoples of this world, whom Marxist urban theorist Mike Davis refers
to as ‘surplus humanity’ (Davis 2006: 174). So like men, women too can and do play
exploitative roles in the existing capitalist patriarchy and see this as a sign of their own
empowerment as women. British eco-feminist Mary Mellor is, therefore, quite correct
to argue that the principal archetype of our time, economic man or homo economi-
cus, is not necessarily male. Mellor explains that, just like career men, career women
turn away from an ethics of care because, like their male counterparts, they ‘have to
operate according to the principles of male/bourgeois individualism, that is, they must
deny any domestic responsibilities or pass them on to someone else (usually another
woman)‘ (Mellor 1992: 55; see also Fakier and Cock 2018: 49). They thereby end up
embedded in ‘a masculine-experience economy … that has cut itself free from the eco-
ological and social framework of human being in its widest sense‘ (Mellor 2009: 254).

A final issue to be considered here in relation to liberal feminism, is the cultiva-
tion of a consumer feminist image that traps women in the capitalist-consumerist
cycle. This ‘liberated woman‘ archetype relates to the post-World War Two emer-
gence of a liberal ‘commodity feminism‘ (Goldman et al. 1991: 333) spurred on by
businesses’ aggressive marketing campaigns targeting women not as housewives but as consumers in their own right (Osgerby 2001: 51–52). Arguably, the very idea of women’s liberation became enfolded in the capitalist-consumerist cycle at this point, since the liberation of women became at least partially articulated in relation to self-care through competent, individualistically orientated consumerism (Osgerby 2001: 331–351). Notably, this tendency transcended race. Because of urbanisation, women of colour moved from a subsistence orientation, through a household provisioning role, to commodity feminism and careerism as markers of both sexual and racial empowerment (Walker 2009: 400–401).

This framing of women’s liberation as something obtainable through individualistic consumerism and the career which affords the latter, is regarded as a debilitation of feminism by some. New Zealand media theorist, Hilary Radner, explains why: a consumer-orientated liberal feminism ‘seems to reply to the women’s movement precisely by containing its demands’, as it involves ‘the inscription of this position … within an institutional structure that remains largely patriarchal and the representation of this position as the capacity to act as a consumer’ (Radner 1995: 2–3). In her turn, the eco-feminist Mies warns women about this capitalist-consumerist trap. She writes: ‘As the capitalist commodity market creates the illusion that the individual is free to fulfil all her … desires and needs, [and] that individual freedom is identical with the choice of this or that commodity, the self-activity and subjectivity of the person is replaced by individual consumerism’ (Mies 1986[1998]: 40). From a more critical viewpoint, then, liberal feminism is little more than an economic ruse. Its epistemological commitments, and its resulting approaches to the women’s struggle, do little to facilitate emancipation from the system that parasitises women, workers, other marginalised peoples and wider nature alike. Moreover, the complicity of liberal feminism with the capitalist patriarchal status quo hamstrings it when it comes to responding to the socio-ecological crises of our time, such as Covid-19. From this, one gains the sense that liberal feminism and materialist eco-feminism are almost diametric opposites except for their shared interest in uplifting women – something that will become clearer in the wake of a more detailed discussion of eco-feminism itself.

MATERIALIST ECO-FEMINISM AS AN EMANCIPATORY PRAXIS

What is now known as a materialist ecological feminism emerged in the 1970s as a grassroots movement of women – one that, crucially, included within its ambit of concern other oppressed and disenfranchised members of the world community.
This movement is also holistic and inevitably so, since it emerged out of women's real-world challenges and concerns, deriving from their experience of breakdown relating to societal and environmental health. Thus, central to eco-feminism of this kind, is a solid understanding that humans form part of a dynamic yet fragile ecosystem, and that their actions should comport with this reality so that, in the long run, people themselves do not become compromised. Australian eco-feminist Ariel Salleh provides some examples of this ‘barefoot epistemology’ (Salleh 1997[2017]: 196) in action:

Eco-feminism is found in initiatives like women’s legal challenges to giant nuclear corporations in the USA and tree-hugging protests against loggers in north India. These actions express a materially embodied standpoint grounded in working women’s commonsense understanding of everyday needs. Despite cultural differences between women around the world, this … politics reflects a common intuition that somehow the struggle for a feminine voice to be heard is joined to the struggle for a nurturant, protective attitude towards our living environment. (Salleh 1997[2017]: 38)

Fakier and Cock, too, discuss this barefoot epistemology in their reflections on eco-feminist organising in South Africa. While explaining that women’s work – ‘social reproduction … the complex tasks that ensure the production and reproduction of the population on a daily and generational basis’ – is what is parasitised by capitalism, they argue that these labours of social reproduction are at the same time epistemologically catalytic ecologically (Fakier and Cock 2018: 44; see also Fraser 2017: 147, 152). They elaborate that ‘women’s unpaid work in their communities to protect the air, water and land necessary to social reproduction, [also] exposes how much environmental damage is due to the externalization of costs by capital’ (Fakier and Cock 2018: 44).

Eco-feminism’s critical focus on capitalism, which differs radically from liberal feminism’s complicity with this system, has understandably resulted in eco-feminism being associated with socialism – if not regarded as a variant of it. Certainly, materialist eco-feminism and eco-socialism, for example, are ‘complementary … political strands’ (Salleh 1991: 129), but generally socialism differs from eco-feminism by being less critical of productivism and of technology’s role therein. Also, while certain forms of socialism, such as eco-socialism, do incorporate concern for the environment, socialist theorists routinely steer clear of factoring into their analyses the parallel exploitation of women and the environment under capitalism. Mellor lays bare the enormous consequence of this attitude when she writes
that ‘it will prove impossible to construct an eco-socialist/feminist revolutionary theory and practice unless we can finally break out of the laager of economic analysis to embrace women and nature, not as objects of the economic system but as subjects in their own right’ (Mellor 1992: 43).

Indeed, caregiving women, as a hyper-exploited group (Fraser 2017: 147) and specifically through their sex–gender-allocated labours, recognise both their embodiment within and people's dependence on the overall health of the physical environment. This, eco-feminists argue, catalyses an emancipatory epistemology and praxis – something corroborated by social reproduction theorists. That is, in social reproduction theory focus might not fall specifically on ecological matters, as it does in eco-feminist theory, but resonant claims are made for the catalytic potency of caregiving: it has ‘distinctive normative and ontological grammars of [its] … own [such as] … ideals of care, mutual responsibility, and solidarity’ (Fraser 2017: 152). Still, some early eco-socialists criticised materialist eco-feminism for supposedly ‘privileg[ing] “body” over mind’ (Salleh 1991: 133) given their focus on embodied caregivers – something that in their view detracted from the business of analysing the problem of capitalism. This does not change the fact that women's epistemological perspectives and materially embedded labours are crucial to factor into analyses of capital. Women need to be heard because they are at the forefront of concerns relating to women's and nature's parallel exploitation under capitalism. Indeed, womanist resistance movements articulating such matters emerged more or less ‘spontaneously’ in the 1970s: not only in France but ‘in other “centers” too – Sicily, Japan, Venezuela, Australia, Finland, [and] the U.S.’ (Salleh 1991: 132). And today, the WoMin African Alliance likewise underscores and works against women's and nature's parallel exploitation. As WoMin leader Samantha Hargreaves states in chapter 1 of this volume, ‘WoMin works on the frontiers of extractivism in the African context and the costs this model of capitalist accumulation externalises to women, their bodies and their labour.’

In effect, ‘women don't need a pre-packaged social philosophy in order to see that their labor and sexuality are “resourced” by men in ways that match the instrumental exploitation of “nature”’ (Salleh 1991: 132). The sociologist Shannon Bell expands on this point: there seems to be an ‘identity correspondence between [women's] … personal identities and the collective identity of the environmental justice movement because many view their activism as an extension of their roles as protectors of children, community, culture, and heritage’ (Bell 2016: 86). Women's caregiving in the home and their related efforts to protect wider nature might go unmonetised and unrecognised but constitute, in actuality, ‘another kind of activity that could be identified as economic’ (Salleh 1991: 134) and that thus requires
serious treatment. New Zealand liberal feminist politician Marilyn Waring has also forced caregiving into view as an undeniably economic activity without which the capitalist system could not exist. In a powerful critique of the United Nations System of National Accounts, she makes a detailed economic analysis of the costs borne by women internationally due to the ‘non-monetised’ status of caregiving, premised on the false ideas that the “average housewife” does not work, and the household is not a productive enterprise’ (Waring 1988[1999]: 112–113). That capitalism owes a colossal debt to these caregivers, to others outside of the formal economy and to wider nature, is something that many strands of Marxism and socialism nonetheless continue to neglect in their focus on workers.

Debt owed to caregiving women is thus a concern shared by materialist eco-feminists and liberal feminists such as Waring at least. But there is an important difference: liberal feminists might push for an economic value to be attributed to such labours, but materialist eco-feminists shed light on the intrinsic epistemological value of such labours. This is because these caregiving labours shape perceptions and behaviours for the better, counteracting the dominant exploitative ethos of capitalism. Mellor, for instance, speaks of the ‘immediate altruism’ that accompanies women’s caregiving work – it ‘is carried out for only incidental personal gain (the pleasure of close personal relationships) and … is immediate in the sense that it cannot be “put off” or slotted into a work schedule’ (Mellor 1992: 54). Falling within the ambit of social reproduction, ‘the needs to which women respond are demands that cannot be ignored; if they are ignored the social fabric of society begins to disintegrate’ (Mellor 1992: 54). And most significantly, Mellor correlates caregiving with a complex, holistic epistemology because ‘women's lives as reflected in domestic and caring work represent the embodiedness of humanity, the link of humanity with its natural being. Women's work represents the fundamental reality of human existence, the body's life in biological time[:] the time it takes to rest, recover, grow up and grow old' (Mellor 2009: 255). The Indian materialist eco-feminist Vandana Shiva likewise observes that ‘women produce and reproduce life not merely biologically, but also through their social role in providing sustenance. All ecological societies of forest-dwellers and peasants, whose life is organised on the principle of sustainability and the reproduction of life in all its richness, also embody the feminine principle’ (Shiva 1989: 42). Salleh again explicitly links women's caregiving activities and indigenous people's labours with reproduction of the humanity–nature metabolism and cultivation of ‘a characteristic epistemology and practice, one that can be articulated as a people's science’ since it derives from these people's 'experience of reproducing nature's metabolic cycles’ (Salleh 2010: 207).
The eco-feminist insistence on the importance of caregiving labour to the reorientation of contemporary societies – an insistence shared by social reproduction theorists – diverges most markedly from ‘power liberal feminism’ (Bhandary 2020). In this recent incarnation of liberal feminism, explains feminist ethicist Asha Bhandary, focus falls ‘on women’s greater professional advancement, increased financial gain, and freedom from caregiving responsibility’ (Bhandary 2020, emphasis added). In the eyes of such feminists, ‘caregiving is accompanied by disadvantages, and its nature is burdensome and mundane; it is clearly seen as ‘an obstacle to women’s maximal self-development and equality of opportunity’ (Bhandary 2020). As a result, such ‘liberal feminism makes everyone as insensible to the needs of the vulnerable as privileged persons (men)’ (Bhandary 2020). In effect, dismissal of care ethics, and lack of connection to exploited Others beyond a specific demographic of women, undermines liberal feminism’s capacity to address multifaceted crises such as Covid-19. By contrast, eco-feminism’s stress on humanity–nature care work and epistemological holism gives this movement an advantage in diagnosing and remediating such crises, as the subsequent analysis aims to illustrate.

COVID-19 THROUGH A MATERIALIST ECO-FEMINIST LENS

Salleh and her co-editors of Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary (Kothari et al. 2019), in an opinion piece on Covid-19, state that ‘the Corona pandemic ends a universe of false promises’, because it exposed that ‘economic globalization has not brought universal prosperity but ecological devastation, social disruption and inequality’ (Kothari et al. 2020). But this is not news to caregiving labourers, indigenous meta-industrials and eco-feminists. Indeed, the fundamental inequalities characteristic of capitalism, which entail injury to women, other oppressed persons, non-human others and wider nature, are what materialist eco-feminists have tried to respond to from the start. And this sensitivity to multiple overlapping dominations and the need for their simultaneous address is what makes materialist eco-feminism genuinely emancipatory as a movement. In fact, ‘it carries forward four revolutions in one. Ecofeminist politics is a feminism in as much as it offers an uncompromising critique of capitalist patriarchal culture from a womanist perspective; it is a socialism because it honours the wretched of the earth; it is an ecology because it reintegrates humanity with nature; [and] it is a postcolonial discourse because it focuses on deconstructing eurocentric domination’ (Salleh 1997[2017]: 282–283). And the Covid-19 pandemic, in laying bare the dominations referred to in the above-mentioned four discourses,
offers a chance to right historical wrongs – the abuse of our earthly home and of marginalised societies, the very people who will suffer most from this pandemic. This viral outbreak is a sign that by going too far in exploiting the rest of nature, the dominant globalising culture has undone the planet’s capacity to sustain life and livelihoods. The unleashing of micro-organisms from their animal hosts means that they must latch on to other bodies for their own survival. (Kothari et al. 2020)

This is a view common to various chapters in this book, and can also be seen in certain press reflections on Covid-19, such as the one offered by the South African ambassador to Ireland and former African National Congress MP, Melanie Verwoerd. Uncannily echoing Kothari et al.’s (2020) opinion piece some two months after its publication, Verwoerd argues that ‘Covid-19 has … highlighted the huge inequalities that exist in our world – our country being one of the most unequal in the world’ (Verwoerd 2020). But questioning matters, she adds, is ‘not something that has been encouraged in the consumerist, growth-driven economic model that the post-World War II generation has grown up in … This epidemic has shown more than ever how intertwined we are as human beings’ (Verwoerd 2020). Such texts consistently thematise the now highly evident wrongs in the world, arguing that the globalising capitalist-consumerist model is responsible and that Covid-19 has revealed – albeit most cruelly – the interrelation of everything and everyone. All of this should imply that the Covid-19 pandemic cannot but have a monumental epistemic impact on people, one perhaps yet to be fully realised. One epistemological misstep badly in need of exposure is the longstanding Eurocentric dualistic construct of man/nature, framing people as separate from, independent of and impervious to the happenings in wider nature. It is certainly the case that Covid-19 has served to undermine the man/nature dualism to a degree, insofar as through this pandemic, people were summarily ripped out of any disembodied view they might have harboured, joining the rest of the planetary ecosystem as just another vulnerable organism.

The foregoing suggests that what eco-feminists theorise is what many women, and men committed to a caregiving or subsistence ethic, often figure out independent of any theoretical education. This is evidently because these issues emerge out of lived experiences (Salleh 1991: 132). And, significantly, argues Hargreaves in chapter 1 of this volume, these are experiences that help meta-industrials to shape ‘the living and breathing’ alternatives so urgently required in her home continent of Africa. But these experiences have often gone ignored by socialist theorists preoccupied with the
productive economy, who in the process ‘fail … women, peasants, and indigenes – labor outside of the factory’, not to mention wider nature itself (Salleh et al. 2010: 188). Even so, socialism is critical of capitalism whereas liberal feminism does not even get that far. The latter’s complicity with capitalism hinders it from being able to offer more to women than a hollow version of liberty – a weakness underpinned by ‘the partial absorption of Second Wave feminism by capitalist patriarchal objectives [which] has blurred many women’s political focus’ (Salleh 1997[2017]: 281).

Nonetheless, because of Covid-19 the need for systemic change is being raised increasingly – and in relation to myriad issues. One powerfully vocalised issue is that women in South Africa and abroad still shoulder much of the care-giving workload, something that was worsened during Covid-19 through government-mandated lockdowns across the world. In this context, not only the continued naturalising of women’s caregiving under patriarchy but women’s own immediate altruism as caregivers (Mellor 1992: 54) deprived many women of any respite. As a woman academic interviewed by The Guardian stated: ‘Research has fallen by the wayside,’ because even though ‘it’s important and I want to do it, … it’s not as urgent as supporting my students. My students and my children have to be my priority’ (Fazackerley 2020).

This in an article reporting that during the UK’s Covid-19 lockdown period, women’s research dropped off completely, whereas for certain journals men’s research submissions increased by as much as 50 per cent. In a similar vein, a South African woman, in a letter submitted to the Parent24 news division, articulates the impasse she was facing as a mother and a worker during the South African Covid-19 lockdowns. Known only as ‘working mom of two’, she contended: ‘I … feel dread at the thought of being torn between being a mother and being a good employee. I mean, how can we be fully committed to either when we are split between the two? My husband assists where possible, but I bear the brunt of the responsibility’ (Parent24 2020). Y et, while these important concerns regarding the division of labour under capitalist patriarchy were being raised, neoliberal pundits were prescribing economic (capitalist) policy-related solutions to Covid-19, which they deemed simply another war that capitalism has to weather (Dell’Arigcia et al. 2020). For them, the objective, ironically, was to save the very system criticised and attacked by Verwoerd and others. The economistic, masculinist ‘war talk’ that emanated from International Monetary Fund (IMF) quarters in relation to a virus, disconcertingly corroborates the view that the capitalist paradigm entrenches ‘the domination of masculine power over life-affirming feminine care’ – something deplorably embodied today ‘in a heavily militarised global neoliberal capitalist (dis)order’ (Kothari et al. 2020). Like the Pluriverse team cited earlier, Verwoerd associates the current socio-economic
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model with aggression and excess, and calls for a radical alternative. She proposes that ‘inherent in these inequalities are a cruelty and an unkindness, a deep-seated injustice, that diminishes all our humanity. As we start to think about a post-Covid world we have to collectively find the moral courage and outrage to change this’ (Verwoerd 2020). This is especially so in the context of poor- and working-class South African women, who before, during and even after the Covid-19 lockdowns, remain trapped in a ‘failing economy infused with patriarchal and corrupt politics [which] places undue burdens on households and fuels domestic violence’ (Fakier and Cock 2018: 48).

Ultimately, perhaps the greatest epistemological chasm between liberal feminism and materialist ecological feminism is that in the eco-feminist view, caregiving is promoted as a potent catalyst for change whereas in liberal feminism, it remains framed as an impediment. Another point worth mentioning, which broadens eco-feminism’s emancipatory reach, is that materialist eco-feminists advance the project of caregiving as highly inclusive, such that an eco-feminist theorist might speak of ‘mothering practices’ when specifically discussing women caregivers but also employ a broader, ‘more generic term holding which lets us talk about kinds of sustaining labour regardless of gender role’ (Salleh and Hanson 1999: 210). Materialist eco-feminism as four revolutions in one constitutes nothing short of a civilisational critique, central to which is rejection of capitalist patriarchy and its dominant values, which liberal feminists seek merely to reform and to nuance to the advantage of select women. Liberal feminism carries the ‘underlying assumption that “male is better” and so in practice, this type of feminism is relatively unconcerned with ‘the fate of women as a whole’ (King 1990: 119). Very importantly, what has also been lost in such incarnations of feminism is ‘the original radical feminist project of changing how men … work, think, love and rule’ – a project retained by eco-feminists such that their ‘politics converges with the men’s movement wish to free “masculinity” from deforming social structures’ (Salleh 1997[2017]: 282). Men and women need to cultivate a care-based societal ethic countering capitalist mores together, and this is not an impossible task because caregivers, many of them women, already preside over ‘the organic basis of this paradigm shift’ (Salleh 1984: 339). Humanity–nature bridging labours, be they caregiving or subsistence, involve participants adopting roles ‘that run … counter to the exploitive technical rationality which is … the requisite masculine norm’ (Salleh 1984: 342). By implication, when people begin to value and take on such roles, they are embracing a feminine value constellation (Fraser 2017: 152–153). This liberation of what might be styled ‘the feminine’ is key to civilisational emancipation:
The suppression of the feminine is truly an all pervasive human universal. It is not just a suppression of real, live, empirical women, but equally the suppression of the feminine aspects of men’s own constitution … [Deep, radical transformation] will not truly happen until men are brave enough to rediscover and to love the woman inside themselves. And we women, too, have to be allowed to love what we are, if we are to make a better world. (Salleh 1984: 344–345)

Eco-feminism sounds forth a call to care, for all people and for nature. In the wake of the further exposure of capitalist patriarchal violence through the Covid-19 pandemic, it is surely a matter of urgency for us all to heed this call, now.

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