Emancipatory Feminism in the Time of Covid-19

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‘OUR EXISTENCE IS RESISTANCE’:
WOMEN CHALLENGING MINING AND THE
CLIMATE CRISIS IN A TIME OF COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION

‘How do you protect yourself against a hail of bullets through your kitchen and bedroom windows after dark where your children are in bed asleep?’ writes the Global Environmental Trust (2020a), following a series of attacks on communities who resist the expansion of mining by Tendele Coal Mining Pty Ltd, a subsidiary of Petmin. Later that year, the news hit the country that Fikile Ntshangase, a prominent activist who resisted the mining-induced relocations in Ophondweni, and a committee member of the Mfolozi Community Environmental Justice Organisation (MCEJO), was gunned down in her kitchen in front of her 11-year-old grandson by three unidentified men. The incident took place on 22 October 2020. Little did she know that her words, ‘I refused to sign. I cannot sell out my people. And if need be, I will die for my people’ (Global Environmental Trust 2020b), would become a reality.

This chapter investigates women’s struggles and resistance in two coal-mining-affected communities in the Highveld, as well as in Somkhele, which lies northwest of Richards Bay in KwaZulu-Natal. Their activities suggest that many African working-class women living in such communities in South Africa are expressing radical eco-feminism in their actions and practices. Their lived resistance to the shocks
of both the Covid-19 pandemic and the more extreme weather events of climate change could promote a unifying narrative in the form of an African eco-feminism. The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and accelerating climate change are both experienced most intensely by poor/working-class African women. This is evident especially in South Africa, which is a major source of the carbon emissions that are driving the rising temperatures, droughts and other extreme events of the climate crisis.

Both the Covid-19 pandemic and the climate crisis are forms of what Rob Nixon (2011) terms ‘slow violence’, meaning violence which is relatively invisible, often unrecognised and, in this case, involves different forms of pollution – of bodies in the case of the pandemic and of water and air by carbon emissions in the case of climate change. Both are lethal processes. It has been suggested that ‘the growing but largely unrecognised death toll from rising global temperatures will come close to eclipsing the current number of deaths from all the infectious diseases combined if planet-heating emissions are not constrained’ (Heywood 2020). Both the climate crisis and the pandemic are violating ecological limits: in the case of climate change, caused by the pollution of air and water and the degradation of soils, and in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, largely caused by the destruction of wildlife habitat and large-scale industrial animal husbandry, which contribute to the spread of the virus. This ‘factory farming’ involves operations that house thousands of animals (such as chickens, pigs, turkeys and cows) under appalling conditions, designed to maximise production while minimising costs (Genoways 2014).

AFRICAN WOMEN’S ROLE IN SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

Under these conditions, African women’s role in social reproduction has become to carry the burden of the two interlinked crises. This chapter suggests that both the climate crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the lockdowns resulting from the latter, have exacerbated gender inequality, especially in mining-affected areas. Inequality is understood not in the economistic terms of assets and income, but as ‘existential inequality’, defined by Göran Therborne as ‘a violation of human dignity; it is a denial of the possibility for everybody’s capabilities to develop’ (Therborne 2013: 10). The chapter suggests that these violations are ‘gendered’ in the sense that black working-class women experience them differently from men and more intensely due to the gendered division of labour – women are responsible for the provision of food, energy and water resources.
In this chapter we do not call the women we cite ‘eco-feminists’, because that is not necessarily how they describe themselves. Makoma Lekalakala, the director of the environmental justice organisation Earthlife, has warned against imposing any ideological labels such as ‘feminist’ or ‘activist’ because they ‘undermine solidarity’ and ‘an ideological consensus is not necessary’. She stresses that ‘there is a lot of different action on climate change, and they are all connected to environmental justice, but we all speak different languages’.

We suggest that, although they do not identify as ‘eco-feminists’, through their lived experience and practices in relation to the Covid-19 crisis and the climate crisis, black working-class women in mining-affected areas are doing important eco-feminist work in four respects:

- Their role in social reproduction, meaning unpaid care work in the daily work performed in their households and communities, particularly in relation to childcare and the procurement of food, energy and water. Unlike the households of the dominant classes where this work is often commodified in extremely exploitative social relations, there is frequently an ethic of sharing and mutual support.
- The spirit of solidarity which informs this work focuses on collective rather than individualised needs, on changes to the benefit of all.
- A respect for nature that goes beyond the expansionist logic of capitalism, which reduces nature to a store of resources for profit.
- Their role in taking responsibility for and caring for the sick, particularly Covid-19 and pollution victims in their homes, hospitals and communities, and educating the public both as nurses and as community health workers.

With at least 102,568 deaths from the Covid-19 pandemic, South Africa was rated the most infected country in Africa and it experienced one of the strictest lockdowns (World Health Organization 2022). The state’s response emphasised restrictions: many businesses in the informal sector, such as taverns and hair salons especially, as well as educational institutions were closed, and three million formal sector workers lost their jobs (two million of whom were women). There were strict controls of public activities and people were urged to remain at home. At the same time, there was some public education about Covid-19 such as the need to maintain physical distance from other people, to wash hands thoroughly and to wear face masks. However, there was no consultation with marginalised groups and both these aspects of the state response completely disregarded the situation of the millions of poor, black South Africans, especially those in informal settlements and
rural areas lacking housing and access to clean water and proper sanitation, which made it impossible for them to self-protect.

This disregard was exacerbated for the thousands living close to the operative coal-fired power stations and open-pit working or abandoned mines. They were already experiencing the direct loss of their health due to air pollution, dispossession, forced removals, social dislocation, loss of their land-based livelihoods such as cattle, goats and chickens, threats to food security, limited access to clean water, violation of their ancestral graves and inadequate consultation on the awarding of mining licences (Hallowes and Munnik 2016, 2017, 2019; Skosana 2021).

‘Gender’ is a relational concept which pays attention to the power involved in all social relations and in this chapter, the focus on women is approached through an intersectional analysis which recognises the interrelation of different forms of oppression. Black working-class women are the ‘shock absorbers’ of the impacts of both the climate crisis and the pandemic lockdown.

WOMEN AS THE SHOCK ABSORBERS OF CRISES

The research that was conducted in the Highveld and at Somkhele revealed that black, working-class women are the most vulnerable to the shocks of the climate crisis in the form of increasing extreme weather events. The shock absorbers of the pandemic and its consequent lockdowns are the women who lack access to the means for protecting themselves and their families, such as clean water, protective masks, sanitisers, relevant information about the pandemic and nutritious food.

Furthermore, black working-class women constitute the majority of community health workers who expose themselves to contamination, and of nurses who work with Covid-19 patients in poor conditions and often without the necessary protective equipment. According to the health minister, as of 4 August 2020, 1 300 health workers had died of Covid-19 and 27 360 had contracted the virus. Women made up the majority of the cases (see Bischoff: chapter 9 of this volume). The National Education, Health and Allied Workers’ Union (Nehawu) threatened a strike as health-care workers continued to face inadequate supplies of protective equipment. Moreover, months into the lockdown instituted in March 2020, a resident of Kwa-Guqa, a township located 16 kilometres west of Emalahleni in Mpumalanga, maintained that the community ‘had not seen a food parcel or a community health worker, and had not received
any information about the pandemic’ (Faith, interview, July 2020). She also reported that ‘our only access to water is from a polluted stream. We are out of water since September last year … lots of people in our area use pit toilets, so we are struggling to get water to drink or wash our hands’. Zanele, from Somkhele in KwaZulu-Natal, shared this experience: ‘We have struggled for water for years now and Covid-19 has placed us under more threat’ (Zanele, interview, July 2020).

Food was also a problem because many of the local spaza shops were closed due to stringent lockdown regulations in Kwa-Guqa. Faith divulged that ‘we have to get a taxi to the nearest shop which is more expensive because taxi fares have increased.’ Furthermore, she reported price profiteering in the local shops during lockdown, some of which related to staple foods such as maize meal, flour, sugar and canned foods. For a resident who is unemployed and survives on a social grant, as do 44 per cent of the population in Mpumalanga (Action Aid 2018: 12), this made access to food during the lockdown difficult. Faith also emphasised the challenge of accessing clinics in their area because at various points during the various stages of the lockdown, clinics and police stations in different parts of Mpumalanga were closed, and in many places there is no ambulance service to carry patients to a hospital – ten kilometres away, in the case of Kwa-Guqa (Faith, interview, July 2020). The Amajuba hospital is one of those in the country which was closed for several days when the hospital manager was diagnosed with Covid-19. Linda, who lives in Arbor, a peri-urban mining area, shared the difficulty of access to healthcare: ‘In our area, we have a mobile clinic which only comes once every fortnight. This means that we can’t get ill before then or after. The mobile clinic has only one doctor. We had difficulty accessing health care before Covid-19, despite the respiratory illnesses most of us have due to coal mining, blasting, dust from trucks transporting coal, and coal-fired power stations in our area. Covid-19 has placed our community’s health under more risk’ (Linda, interview, July 2020). Furthermore, like Faith, she also mentioned that the lockdown and lack of access to water compelled them to buy foods from supermarkets in towns such as Witbank, Ogies and Delmas, instead of growing their own. She maintained that ‘the taxi-fare and staple foods such as bread have increased at least by R5’. In communities whose only source of income is social grants, this increase has dire consequences for households (see Morgan and Cherry: chapter 5 of this volume). Price-hiking during the Covid-19 pandemic was a national problem. The Competition Commission received over 800 complaints about food pricing after the beginning of the lockdown and prosecuted 30 companies within the first few months (Gedye 2020). The Commission found, for example, that between April and June 2020, staples such as
25 kg bags of white mealie meal increased from R129.99 to R159.99, and others by the following percentages: rice (29%), cake flour (7%), cooking oil (13%) and bread (14% to 16%). The price of affordable sources of protein was also increased: eggs (18%), pilchards (3%), sugar beans (18%) and amasi (9%).

In addition, the closure of police stations had terrible consequences for women, who experienced increased gender-based violence during the lockdown. Records show that the gender-based violence hotline received 2 300 calls in the first five days of lockdown – nearly three times the rate prior to lockdown (Harrisberg 2020). The general sentiment of those who live in coal-affected areas was that the lockdown was ‘a nightmare’ and most stress that their living conditions, always adverse, worsened during the lockdown. The only positive outcome of the lockdown that was noted was that air pollution and dust decreased with fewer mines operating and fewer trucks transporting coal on the road. As a result, community-based researchers observed an improvement in their health. Linda (interview, July 2020) revealed, ‘I coughed less during the lockdown, my bronchitis got a little better.’

Women bear the brunt of multiple crises. Both the accelerating climate crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic mean women are having to work harder to perform all the tasks of social reproduction, such as having to walk further to obtain clean water, growing food on degraded land, making meagre amounts of money stretch further to buy necessities, dealing with increased domestic-based violence and caring for those ill from exposure to toxic pollution or the Covid-19 virus. This unpaid care work involves intense levels of anxiety and overburdening. As one woman said, ‘We are the rock. We have to deal with everything.’ The collective nature of much of this work is significant: women sharing the onerous task of clearing land for planting, hanging their washing together, collecting water or firewood as a group. In other words, the caring work of social reproduction involves strong affective bonds, and the emotional demands are acknowledged and discussed.

The concept of social reproduction directs us to the importance of this work in the class-based, material realities of everyday life (Luxton 2006; Bezanson and Luxton 2006; Fakier and Cock 2009). Furthermore, the concept makes visible the ‘value’ of unpaid domestic work, which is often trivialised or ignored. It provides us with a powerful critique of capitalism and its relation to patriarchy, and exposes the savage inequalities on which it is based. It points us to alternative social forms and provides a validation of, and links to, other struggles.

In mining-affected communities many working-class struggles are moving beyond the point of production to the terrain of social reproduction. Much collective action, usually framed as protests about service delivery, is confronting the lack of access to the material environmental conditions necessary for social
reproduction, such as access to clean air, water, adequate housing and land for subsistence agriculture. Women often constitute the majority of people in these struggles confronting the threats to their health, land and livelihoods. This is because their role in social reproduction means that they deal most directly with the damaging effects of polluted air and water, crop failures and the more extreme weather events associated with climate change. The struggle to meet some of the social responsibilities that women have in their communities saw some in Somkhele take to the streets in 2018, over water. This struggle began 15 years ago, with the Tendele anthracite open-cast coal mine exacerbating the water crisis in the area. Before the water crisis, the feminist organisation WoMin had facilitated participatory action research to bring awareness of how the presence of the mine impacted the community’s access to water. The women presented their research findings to the local government where they were promised action, but the problem was not addressed (WoMin 2019). In 2019, at least 29 women were arrested for property violation and were subsequently released on bail.

The explanation for women’s preponderance in these environmental struggles is not essentialist. It is not based on any natural affinity which women have with nature, which some people claim. On the contrary, writes Carolyn Merchant, ‘any analysis that makes women’s essence and qualities special ties them to a biological destiny that thwarts any possibility of [their] liberation’ (Merchant 1990: 102). The explanation lies in the gendered division of labour; the unpaid care work which women are doing both in the home and in the community in relation to the climate and pandemic crises. As Vandana Shiva writes, ‘Women are most directly involved with subsistence work and are the safeguards of the natural resources needed to sustain the family and community’ (Shiva 2014: 165).

Not only does this work involve protecting nature from pollution and destruction by consuming natural resources minimally and respectfully, it also promotes a new narrative about our relationship with nature; a revaluing of something more than a store of natural resources for economic activity, to be utilised for short-term gain without concern for long-term survival. Under capitalism, nature is still mainly viewed as external, as a store of natural resources, allowing what Max Oelshinger (2002) has termed ‘resourcism’, often used by capital instrumentally to externalise production costs. Naomi Klein has decried the ‘expansionist extractive mindset which has so long governed our relationship to nature … we need a new civilizational paradigm, one grounded not in dominance over nature, but in respect for natural cycles of renewal and acutely sensitive to natural limits’ (Klein 2011). The environmental imaginary of some of the residents of Somkhele takes this even further, stressing our shared connections in an ecological community.
and affirming the value of participatory democracy and accountability. In eFuleni (KwaZulu-Natal), a group of women who formed their organisation, Thandolwethu, in 2018 explained, ‘The organisation was formed as we were attending meetings as mine-affected communities. We realised that mines have specific effects on women … being part of the organisation has changed our lives because whatever we harvest, we share. And when we sell our vegetables, we can feed our children and pay for their transport for school’ (Thandolwethu, interview, June 2019).

The role of ‘shock absorber’ implies a certain vulnerability or exposure that could fade into a sponge-like passivity and perpetuate the notion of women as predominantly victims. But these women are also protecting their communities by challenging social and environmental injustice.

BUILDING RESISTANCE

Before the pandemic, in many mining-affected communities women were forming new grassroots organisations, building social networks, formal or informal alliances and a collective identity through an emphasis on shared everyday experiences. Many of these grassroots organisations draw on notions of climate justice, food sovereignty and energy democracy, which are building blocks for an eco-feminist society. However, after the start of the pandemic, all resistance efforts in mining-affected communities in provinces such as Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal faced considerable obstacles. The lockdown restrictions on maintaining a physical distance from other people translated into a social distance, thus eroding social bonds. The restrictions banned gatherings of more than 40 people. The state not only blocked organisation, but also used violence to enforce its rules, arresting a group of women violating lockdown regulations in a collective protest about the lack of access to water and confiscating the goods of women traders when such economic activity was banned (Majavu 2020). As one resident said, ‘It is difficult to practise solidarity in our communities, now each one is on her own … we used to help our neighbours with their difficulties but now it is hard’ (Faith, interview, July 2020). The individualisation of the struggle is not simply a Covid-19 problem. In Somkhele the women shared how mining threatens resistance by providing job opportunities only to a few and vulnerable individuals (Thandolwethu, interview, June 2019).

Material dependence on coal for heating and cooking, and for providing employment as well as a market for local informal sector activities, produces a certain ambivalence in especially women’s resistance to coal. In Mpumalanga there are complex patterns of ambiguous resistance. For example, Mildred is active in the
grassroots organisation Mining Affected Communities United in Action (MACUA) and participated in the mass march of 5 000 people organised by MACUA at the giant coal power station, Kusile, but she sells *vetkoek* outside the mine in order to survive. Several informants expressed an ambivalence about coal because of this dependence. A member of a local organisation which describes itself as ‘anti coal mining’ has a contract as a cleaner at a local mine. Some communities, such as Arbor and the informal settlement around the Black Wattle colliery in Middelburg (Mpumalanga), regularly receive a wheelbarrow of inferior-quality coal from the mine and many depend on coal as a source of energy because either they are not connected to the electricity grid or ‘there are no trees here to provide wood to cook and warm our houses’ (exchange workshop, Kwa-Guqa, 11 July 2019). No alternatives to coal as a source of energy were mentioned. Many stressed that ‘coal is good because it gives us electricity. With coal you can cook and keep warm’. Similarly, various ‘developmental’ initiatives by different mining corporations, such as schools and a mobile clinic, are used extensively. For example, one of the community-based researchers, Linda, works as a tailor in a container shelter which was supplied by Ntshovelo Mining in Arbor. The women also make a living by sewing overalls for coal-mine workers.

Coal thus provides the possibility of employment and coal-mine workers provide a market for extensive informal sector activities. These forms of livelihood are crucial in South Africa, as in the global South, especially for women. Selling fruit and vegetables, ‘russian’ sausages, chicken parts, fish and chips, alcohol and cigarettes and herbal medicine; providing services such as panel beating and vehicle spraying, shoe repairs, clothes washing, hairdressing and cooking food; operating driving schools and servicing taverns were some of the informal livelihood activities identified in a scoping exercise on this dependence. Others let backyard rooms to migrant coal miners, wash clothes and cars, drive the coal trucks and do cleaning work.

In Arbor, one woman described how letting a backyard room to a coal miner brought in an income of R800, which provided ‘food for the household’. The food items consumed were ‘tea, sugar and mealie meal’. She was a participant in exchange workshops and among the 120 informal traders and coal workers interviewed in three different Mpumalanga communities – Arbor, Vosman and Phola. Many were opposed to the closure of coal mines for a range of reasons. Another woman asked, ‘If the mine closes how will I get compensation for the damage to my house from blasting?’ The most common reason cited for opposing mine closures was increased unemployment. The possibility of these closures generated some degree of anxiety. ‘It is unclear what will happen to us if the mines close. What about the people who
are starving out there?’ During one exchange workshop, instead of understanding a just transition as a space for positive change, it was even claimed that ‘this just transition will kill us.’ There were frequent appeals for information. Most said during the workshops, ‘This just transition is very confusing. We people on the ground are not informed. And anyway, the damage has already been done.’

All these forms of dependence create what Victor Munnik calls a ‘captive imaginary’ which makes it difficult to conceptualise a just transition to a world without coal. In answer to the direct question, ‘What would a world without coal look like?’, most answered in catastrophic terms. For example: ‘a world without coal would be dark and bad with no electricity, fewer jobs and more crime; ‘it will be the death of my business. It will mean going back to live like our forefathers, no electricity, no petrol, no development’; ‘it would be a dark and dangerous world full of crime and hunger’.

However, there were exceptions. For example, one participant commented during an exchange workshop that a world without coal would ‘be healthier, because there will be no dust, our streams will be clean, our trees will be safe, no one will cut them down for mining operations. It will be a greener world without coal. A world without coal would be a beautiful world, no sinkholes, no dust, no pollution, no dangers from all the coal trucks.’ Another coal worker said during the workshop, ‘A world without coal will be better, less sickness, clean water and available land. Also, we will be healthy … our generation is a sick generation.’

Besides these complex connections to coal, both formal and informal, there is often a normalisation of toxic pollution as natural and inevitable in these Mpumalanga communities. The causal connection between the more extreme weather events of accelerating climate change and carbon emissions is not directly obvious, and more extreme weather events are not always connected to climate change in the popular media. In several community workshops in Mpumalanga, it was evident that climate change – the bedrock of the argument for a transition from coal – was not fully understood and seemed remote and abstract to desperately poor communities concerned with immediate survival.

Material dependence is not the only factor inhibiting resistance. There is also increasing repression, violence and intimidation from supporters of mining. The proponents of extractivism include chiefs and headmen who are the executives of the local economy in the former bantustans. Many are notorious for the authorisation of mining deals without the consent of the affected communities (Capps 2012; Skosana 2012). The unresolved role of traditional authorities in South Africa, as well as their historical role in the administration of land, has positioned chiefs as the agents of dispossession in mining areas. In Somkhele, over 100 households have
been relocated by Tendele Coal since beginning open-cast mining in 2007. During the pandemic, Tendele launched an application in the Pietermaritzburg High Court to force the remaining 24 of 145 families to move from the Ophondweni and Emalahleni area, in line with plans to expand the mining operations at the border of the Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park. Both affected areas are under the authority of the Mpukunyoni Traditional Council, whose signatures, which authorised mining and the relocations, appear on Tendele’s affidavit.

The traditional council in the area not only controls the land, but also exercises a close surveillance of villagers. One of the anti-coal militants in Somkhele had an armed man point a gun at him for resisting removal from his home (Ramabina 2020). Another activist revealed that his car was burned and that he faced multiple forms of intimidation from people in the traditional authority office (Lethabo, interview, June 2019). Activists face various other threats such as banishment, torching of their houses and defamation suits for criticising the mine, chiefs and the local government. One informant said, ‘Organising in Somkhele and Fulani is difficult because people are afraid of the chiefs. They fear for their lives. Even pickets and marches are becoming dangerous’ (Lethabo, interview, June 2019). In tribal areas, organising a march requires permission from the office of the traditional authority, the police, as well as the local municipality. This bureaucratic permit process is put in place to halt all kinds of resistance.

Another young woman at a workshop stressed the power of the chief and his indunas (headmen) to allocate land and impose fines. She attended a public meeting in Fulani, organised by the mining corporation. ‘The mining men told us that the traditional council gave them the authority to mine, but no one ever came to my house and asked my permission.’ After the meeting, an induna visited her home and said, ‘I don’t like what you are saying. If you continue to say that mining might be bad, you and your family will be banned from this village, and you will have to pay a fine.’ Asked why she never reported this to the police, she commented, ‘No, you cannot go to the police station. You have to deal with it in a traditional, cultural way.’ In the same workshop another participant commented, ‘With their powerful traditional authority the chiefs rely on fear and intimidation to maintain power and control.’ There are fears in mining-affected communities that the police collude with the chiefs; that they are bribed by the mine, instead of protecting residents. In Somkhele, Tendele Mining management instigated violence indirectly through linking resistance to job losses and bonus payments. In their affidavit to the High Court, Tendele mentioned that failure to relocate the 24 families from Ophondweni and Emalahleni would result in the loss of jobs. This is a form of domination which could generate submission and acquiescence. However, one woman
leader in Makhasaneni said, ‘We are not scared of dying, we even sleep with doors unlocked. If they kill us it will be known that we died fighting the mine’ (cited by Yeni 2018: 16).

The support of coal-mining corporations by local authorities generally – not only in KwaZulu-Natal – is another major obstacle to resistance. For example, in justifying his decision to grant approval for coal mining to Atha-Africa Ventures in the Mabola Protected Environment, a government official maintained that the severely impoverished local communities ‘would benefit directly both socially and economically from the mine’ (cited in Bega 2017).

ECO-FEMINISM

Eco-feminism is a contested notion. It is claimed that ‘eco-feminism is by no means a position or a theory but implies a wide-open field of enquiry’ (Rigby 1998: 144). While encompassing a diversity of approaches, it opposes all forms of hierarchy and domination, stresses the exploitation of women and nature and frequently claims that women have a specific relationship to nature because the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature are intertwined. It is not embraced as a label, or a set of political beliefs, but as a form of solidarity with other women, a way of life, a way of practising a commitment to collective action for change, change which goes beyond the narrow conception of gender equality that characterises liberal feminism within the existing social order. Whereas few women we encountered during our research claim the identity of ‘feminist’, their lives demonstrate this commitment, their support for other women and their challenge to the individualising elitism of liberal feminism. They are concerned with collective empowerment rather than individual advancement.

Driven by a desire for survival, do these women’s eco-feminist values and practices – a respectful, reciprocal relationship with nature and caring and solidarity – represent a form of resistance? Are they expressing in their actions and practices an understanding of radical eco-feminism? As Greta Gaard writes, ‘Ecofeminism has been a theory and movement largely articulated by the activists themselves’ (Gaard 2010: 648). It has been argued that ‘it might seem reasonable for western academics to label some movements [of poor women in the global South] as feminist on the basis of their discourses, actions and values – despite the fact that not any of them identify as feminists. In many countries in the global south, it is not an easy or simple choice for movements to declare or define themselves as feminists’ (Seppala 2016: 14). This is for a number of reasons that are relevant in Africa, such
as increasing state violence, surveillance and intimidation, and because feminism often carries negative connotations.

The organisation WoMin operates in these mining-affected areas and promotes an explicitly eco-feminist agenda. WoMin is an NGO which operates throughout Africa with its main mission being ‘to support the building of women’s movements to challenge destructive extractivism and propose development alternatives that respond to most African women’s needs.’ The organisation has strong connections with grassroots organisations, especially in Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal. Its logic is that African working-class and peasant women are the shock absorbers of the climate crisis and need to be involved in defining just solutions for people and the climate at a continental scale. They maintain that ‘the African climate justice movement is weak and fragmented.’ For this reason, they are committed to a charter-building and dialogue process. ‘We see this as a key to support the strengthening of the climate movement and bringing women’s voices and demands into the centre of thinking about the just transition as a development alternative.’ They are committed to struggling against the extractivist model of development, which extracts profits from scarce non-renewable resources, because, they note, extractivism is deeply patriarchal and racist.

In a recent document, ‘Women building power,’ WoMin call for ‘a gendered just transition’ because ‘the current energy system is unequal and unjust, leads to energy poverty and has to change’ (WoMin 2016: 41). WoMin is presently mobilising for a Just Transition Charter with grassroots women throughout Africa. A meeting of a group of eco-feminists in July 2018 resulted in a draft of 26 principles titled ‘The Mogale Declaration,’ which ‘provides a working frame and a clear set of political demands,’ including:

- Ecological balance – a harmonious coexistence with nature
- Social and economic justice for all
- Food sovereignty
- Socialised renewable energy which benefits women
- Clean air and water
- Valuing and reclaiming African traditional knowledge
- Living ubuntu in our relations with each other and nature
- Land held as commons.

The content of the charter will be built in a participatory process which involves asking women questions such as, ‘What is the world you want?’ This contrasts sharply with the values of neoliberalism, such as possessive individualism and
acquisitiveness. For many eco-socialists, the goal is ‘living well’ rather than striving to live better at the expense of others. What is problematic is that the ‘living’ often ignores women’s care work. This is why the preamble to the Mogale Declaration states, ‘together we will define what just development and a fair transition from capitalist patriarchy to a different social and economic order would look like’ (WoMin 2019: 2). Too many charters and manifestos are not grounded in grassroots participation and many are gender blind.

WoMin is committed to participatory action research which ‘enables women to carry out social investigations into their own issues and articulate the problems from their own perspectives’ (WoMin 2017). They run annual feminist schools throughout the African continent and are organising in different ways, for example, a week-long camp of 80 women from mining-affected communities at Ogies in Mpumalanga. Sharing her experience of the camp, Beverley said, ‘There were women of all ages from mines all over the country and we learned about things like climate change and renewable energy.’ The camp involved women cooking their own food, sharing limited water and sleeping on the floor of a local church, because ‘people are so poor in this area, we wanted to organise differently which didn’t involve staying in expensive hotels … instead we were practising simplicity and sharing’ (Beverley, WoMin organiser, interview, July 2018).

There are flashes of a formal, organised commitment to eco-feminism in other initiatives. For example, another feminist organisation, the Rural Women’s Assembly (RWA), formed in 2009, brings together some 500 community-based organisations working on food and land issues and is deeply committed to a just transition. It describes itself as ‘a self-organised network or alliance of national rural women’s movements, assemblies, grassroots organisations and chapters of mixed peasant unions, federations and movements across eight countries in the SADC [Southern African Development Community] region.’ Their strategies include running feminist schools, organising exchange visits throughout the region and promoting alternatives such as agroecology and seed saving as key components of a just transition. In their statement marking ten years of operating throughout southern Africa, the RWA stated, ‘in this great diversity of language, culture, sexuality, histories and experiences, we have managed to forge unity and solidarity’. They are ‘very committed to an eco-feminist methodology’ which respects emotional work as part of social reproduction and ‘demand that our connectedness to nature is respected … all life should thrive. Everything is connected in the web of life’ (RWA 2020). WoMin and RWA both operate feminist schools for local women which involve deepening
local understandings of concepts such as climate justice and emphasise women’s solidarity (see Azeez: chapter 2 of this volume).

This not only means collective empowerment rather than the individual advancement of women but also involves a redefinition of ‘nature’ in two senses: firstly, a rejection of ‘nature’ as the source of gender identities which subordinate women by ‘naturalising’ qualities of submission, and secondly, a rejection of the dualistic view of ‘nature’ as a discrete entity separate from society. The latter is not ‘new’ in that it draws on an integrated understanding of the nature–society relation as integral to many ‘traditional’ African cultures. However, in the instrumentalist, expansionist logic of neoliberal capitalism, nature is separate from humans, a store of resources for economic activities and a sink for waste products.

CONCLUSION

This chapter describes a context in which black working-class women are bearing the burdens of social reproduction intensified by climate shocks and the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as numerous injustices, violence and patriarchal power. They are also contesting these patterns of domination and exclusion, but there are many constraints. The zones of exclusion in which they live are replete with threats to their known worlds. They experience a multidimensional insecurity caused by both health threats from the pollution of soil, water and air by the coal mines and coal-fired power stations in the areas where they live, and now by the added threats of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is a level of insecurity both material – anxiety about where the next meal is coming from – and existential, about their futures with the closing of the coal mines and/or the spread of the pandemic. The physical distancing required by the state lockdowns has eroded social bonds, making mobilisation more difficult and blocking any sense of effective agency. This is the moment when a unifying narrative such as an African eco-feminism is needed.

Much environmental activism by these women is not framed as eco-feminism. But their struggle to survive in mining-affected communities represents an expression of an eco-feminism as a set of practices rather than as an identity. The eco-feminist values and practices of caring, a respectful, reciprocal relationship with nature, solidarity with other women, and commitment to transformative change and collective empowerment rather than individual advancement represent a form of localised resistance. As has been said of a different context, ‘our very existence is the resistance’. 
NOTES

1 University of Johannesburg Roundtable on Action against Climate Change, Johannesburg, 2 September 2020.

2 Social identities are multiple and oppression overlaps. It is important to understand how relations of domination reinforce one another but also are experienced differently, for example how black women experience racism differently from black men. However, the current usage of the notion of intersectionality is problematic because it potentially distracts from the class relations which shape the material conditions of the everyday.

3 All interviewee names used in this chapter are pseudonyms.

4 See https://womin.africa/mogale-declaration-living-the-future-now/.

5 See https://www.landportal.org/organization/rural-women%E2%80%99s-assembly-southern-africa.

REFERENCES


