

Eco-feminist organizing in South Africa: Reflections on the Feminist Table

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Abstract

This article focuses on the activities of a modest feminist initiative termed ‘the Feminist Fable’. Established in 2012, it is one of a number of initiatives trying to develop an eco-feminist solidarity among grassroots black women in contemporary South Africa. It uses the Marxist-feminist conception of social reproduction - the unpaid care work which these women do outside the market, both in their households and in their communities which is essential to capitalism, but which also contains a transformative potential. By focusing on the legacy of colonialism and apartheid and drawing on black women’s experiences of socially and ecologically destructive capitalism in contemporary South Africa, we aim to contribute to the literature on eco-socialist feminist struggles and resistance from a Southern perspective.

Key words

South Africa, Marxist-feminism, social reproduction, eco-socialism, resistance, care

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Introductionⁱ

“My mother was a kitchen girl, my father was a garden boy. That’s why I’m a socialist.”ⁱⁱ

This is one of the songs sung by participants of the Feminist Table, an annual meeting of women representing community-based activist organisations in South Africa. The Feminist Table is a modest initiative established in 2012 by the authors to address the crises black working class and peasant women in South Africa experience from a feminist perspective. It emerged from the ‘Marikana Moment’ which acknowledges the support women provided to the miners in their long strike actionⁱⁱⁱ.

In the aftermath of Marikana, at a time when South African activists and academics confronted the country’s multiple crises, we applied to the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung^{iv} to host a workshop with women activists from community-based organisations across the country. At the end of the first workshop, those present agreed to continue this initiative and while it relies heavily on volunteer work, FES continued to provide modest funding. Annual meetings of some 40 – 60 women activists representing their organisations in different parts of the country are augmented by horizontal relations of support and information between meetings. The name derives from the gendered division of labour whereby women have the responsibility for putting food on the table. It is one of a number of initiatives trying to develop solidarity and an eco-feminist understanding among grassroots black women in contemporary South Africa. This paper describes how doing so involves politicizing the Marxist-feminist concept of social reproduction – the unpaid care work women do outside the market, both in their households and in their communities which contains a transformative potential.

The Feminist Table

Anna Tsing (2015, 66) insists that we need to look “for the non-capitalist elements on which capitalism depends”. Following this, the Feminist Table focuses on the activities of the activist women who struggle to secure reproduction of their households and their communities outside the market. The organisations represented at the Feminist Table range from those mobilising around and resisting the exploitation of extractive mining^v, gender-based violence, work on farms, and evictions, to those fighting for environmental justice, access to reproductive care land, clean water, affordable energy, and decent, healthy working conditions. It is the aim of the Feminist Table to develop solidarity across these related struggles.

The Feminist Table operates with key principles which are reiterated at the start of every meeting. They are:

- (1) The creation of a safe and place for collective analysis and debate. This involves respectful listening to each other and being open to new people and diverse ideas. Debate is promoted especially through the focus on social reproduction and how capitalist societies depend on the unpaid care work that women do in the household and the community.
- (2) Dialogic learning which refers to the sharing of experiences and deepening our collective understanding through linking this experience to explanation. For example in relation to the food crisis grassroots women articulate and share their experiences of coping with crop failures and increasing food prices. There is also input from resource people on why food prices are rising but the emphasis is on mutual learning from all parties, moving from the experience to explanation of the cause of hunger, or from the experience of drought and water shortages to explanations of

the nature of climate change. So this involves connecting ‘resource persons’ and grassroots women at a time when there seems to be a widening gap which weakens feminist thinking.

(3) The promotion of both sociability and solidarity. Giving all women and opportunity to speak and listening to all accounts of struggle develop bonds and understanding between women who often hail from different parts of the country. Women’s strength and resilience which emerges from these conversations are celebrated through collective singing and dancing.

(4) Debating alternative social forms, institutions and practices outside of capitalism, such as co-operative arrangements for childcare; agro-ecology co-operatives; bulk buying; decentralized, community controlled forms of renewable energy; the development of ‘people’s restaurants’ and community food centers, seed-sharing, to mention a few. These discussions aim to counter how capitalism systematically obliterates any notion of alternative social relations. Many people have lost the capacity to imagine a world beyond capitalism. Thus developing our imaginative capacities to envisage an alternative world is part of building a transformative feminism which is anti-capitalist and involves women “acting in solidarity as part of the larger struggle to eradicate domination in all its forms.” (hooks 2015, 22) Exploring alternatives, 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.

The Feminist Table attempts to link experience with explanation. One of the ways in which this is done is creatively through art and drawing sessions. Drawing sessions at the Feminist Table allows women, firstly to express how care is being conducted in the household, predominantly by women and girls. Secondly, discussing their drawings collectively, reinforces the understanding that the division of labour which allocates work to women is the key to women’s

subordination. To illustrate, at a recent FT workshop, one of the women spoke about walking on her knees with a bowl of water and a cloth to help men kin to wash their hands before a meal. Other women in the room pointed out that only women are expected to do this, and that these activities rest on assumptions that men are breadwinners even though women are also engaged in livelihoods. One woman summed it by saying that the ‘respect and dignity’ embedded in these activities are the reserved for men, while women are meant to take pride in serving them. Suggestions that subservience is not natural are made in non-threatening ways. Discussions are quite emotion-laden and could erupt in tears or laughter, but are always conducted with respect.

Discussions about and illustrations of women’s lived experiences are further elaborated on in subsequent sessions, when activists and academics make the links between household activities and the broader economy and society. In these interactive sessions dialogues are held where questions such as “who bears the costs of social reproduction” and “who benefits from this work” are posed and answered in group settings or collectively in plenary sessions. Listening, sharing and encouraging those who are more tentative to speak of their experience are dealt with in various ways. The most important being to have simultaneous translation for those who are not well-versed or confident in speaking English. The participants themselves are eager to overcome the obstacles of a multi-lingual environment as expressed by one farmworker participant who said to the entire group, “I don’t care what language we speak. I came here to listen to what your heart says.” In these ways solidarity and empathy strengthen.

Recently representatives from the different organisations talk about the initiatives they have taken on in their communities to socialize domestic labour and ecological struggles. One group

of women farmworkers, for example, described how they took over a government-initiated food bank when they realized that incompetence within government structures prevented the food from being distributed and led to wastage. They then established their own foodbank with their crops and ensured timeous and fair distribution of vegetables. These are intense learning sessions when organisations learn from each other. There are always moments, however, of celebrating successful campaigns or simply the strength of women. Thus, the sessions are interspersed with singing and dancing.

Theoretical approach of the Feminist Table: Marxist-Feminism

An important insight from Marx that Marxist feminism builds on is his observation that ‘the most indispensable means of production’ is the worker and that the ‘maintenance and reproduction of the working class remains a necessary condition for the reproduction of capital’ (Mar, (1867) 1976, 718). What he neglected was that this ‘maintenance’ and ‘reproduction’ involves a great deal of work done by women. While Marx looked behind the sphere of exchange into what he called the ‘hidden abode of production’ in order to understand capitalism, Marxism feminism takes this further to explore the hidden abode of social reproduction. The core of the integration of Marxism and feminism lies in this concept of social reproduction. While not specific to Marxism, it is a contested concept (Bezanson and Luxton 2006; Laslett and Brenner 1989) and often defined too broadly to be meaningful.

In this paper, social reproduction is used to refer to the complex tasks and processes that ensure the production and reproduction of the population on a daily and on a generational basis. It means care work which includes child rearing, obtaining and preparing food, cleaning, caring for

the sick and the elderly. Most of this care work is performed by women as unpaid domestic labour in the household. It is affective labour which creates social bonds, both inter-generationally and horizontally. Marxist Feminist analysis has demonstrated how women's unpaid care work that reproduces the working class acts as a subsidy for capital, by externalizing the costs of social reproduction. As Nancy Fraser (2014, 61) writes, "Wage labor could not exist in the absence of housework, child-raising, affective care and a host of other activities which help to produce new generations or workers and replenish existing ones, as well as to maintain social bonds and shared understandings... Social reproduction is an indispensable condition for the possibility of capitalist production." In addition, women's unpaid work in their communities to protect the air, water, and land necessary to social reproduction, exposes how much environmental damage is due to the externalization of costs by capital.

This emphasis on social reproduction in Marxist-feminism is important in the South African context as it directs us to the class based, material realities of everyday life. This emphasis on material conditions highlights one of the most serious crises we face in contemporary South Africa, the food crisis which is defined by the co-existence of hunger^{vi} and wastage^{vii}. Black working class women are the shock absorbers of this crisis. Secondly it makes visible the 'value' of unpaid domestic work which is often trivialized or ignored^{viii}. Thus, the emphasis on social reproduction provides us with a powerful critique of capitalism, its relation to patriarchy and exposes the savage inequalities on which it is based. The links between production and reproduction also points us to alternative social forms and lastly it provides a validation of, and links to, other struggles, particularly environmental justice ones.

The multiple, extreme and racialized forms of inequality in South Africa demolish any conception of feminism as limited to challenging patriarchal power. As bell hooks wrote, “Feminism, as liberation struggle must exist apart from, and as a part of the larger struggle to eradicate domination in all its forms. We must understand that patriarchal domination shares an ideological foundation with racism and other forms of group oppression, and that there is no hope that it can be eradicated while these systems remain intact.” (hooks 1989, 22) This is at the core of the black feminist critique of white 1970s feminism which emanated from the USA; a feminism which was concerned with individual advancement rather than collective struggle in which white feminists tended to project their experiences of female oppression as universal.

This is the crucial insight in intersectional analysis’ which takes account of the multiple, interconnected sources of oppression to which different women are differently subjected. It has been claimed that an intersectional lens exposes “how power actually works and can promote struggles against power’s multiple and differentiated effects” (Chun et al, 2013, 920). In the South African context its significance lies in how it forces white feminists to acknowledge race and class privilege and the benefits deriving from living in a “white supremacist heteropatriarchal capitalism.” (Abrahams 2011, 2). It is important to understand how relations of domination reinforce each other but also are experienced differently, for example how black women experience racism differently from black men.

But, warns Gordon (2016, 340), “the concept has drifted toward emphasizing some aspects of domination while occluding others, especially economic inequality, and occasionally toward a pluralist, empiricist understanding of diversity that omits matters of power.” This neglect of

power and the conspicuous absence of an analysis or reference to capitalism “reflect the corporatization of the academy and its increasing subservience to a neo-liberal regime.” (Aguilar 2016, 203) Furthermore, intersectional analysis frequently asserts that all forms of oppression are equivalent, whereas a Marxist feminism gives a special relevance to class in capitalist society. Gender is not reducible to class but always has a class relevance. Bannerji points out that “the insistence on equivalence and the vehement objection of the primacy of class are the driving factors in intersectionality arguments based on postmodernism.” (2016, 106) The flattening of oppressions and their lack of anchor in intersectional studies sheds no light whatever on their possible causes or why they persist. Class analysis has an explanatory primacy- it enables us to comprehend race and gender oppression and how these identity categories are activated as mechanisms to facilitate exploitation. Race does not cause racism or gender cause sexism. The primacy of class puts the fight against racism and sexism at the center. Oppression is multiple and intersecting but its causes are not. The intensity of such oppressions in South Africa means that a reworking of Marxist-feminism formulated in the Global North is necessary to address the legacy of apartheid and colonialism in South Africa.

Social Reproduction in South Africa

Key features of this legacy are that most black working class women continue to live in poverty and experience multiple and interlocked forms of oppression along class, race and gender lines. Black working class women in South Africa continue to shoulder the burden of reproductive labour not only in their under-resourced households and communities which have limited access to running water and adequate sanitation^{ix}, but also many travel to the households of the middle

class to care for their homes, children and elderly at near slave wages. Thus, a focus on social reproduction is also a focus on class difference between women.

There is an important distinction between the focus on social reproduction in the Global North and in the Global South. While in the Global North, welfare states (or approximations thereof) have made inroads towards the decommodification of social reproduction through provisioning of social services for the poor, the elderly and children, in the Global South access to such services have been, and remain, limited. The implications of the shrinking of Northern welfare regimes in countries such as Canada have re-activated a concern with social reproduction last seen when debates on domestic labour were prominent. Similarly, a focus on the international class divisions of women have become a focus in migration studies through research on women from the South migrating to perform reproductive labour in the North (Farris 2015). Anderson (2000) argues that this form of work does not only dispel the myth of a universal sisterhood but also shows how the reproductive labour of black women reproduce the class status of their Northern women employers. Ironically, though, some studies from the North about women in the South, still retain and reinforce the image of Southern women as captives of their socio-economic conditions, and as ill-informed about feminism and ecological concerns. (Mohanty 1984, Feldman-Savelsberg 2016), this paper argues the opposite. The activities of the women of the Feminist Table, we argue provides a snapshot of a multitude of acts of resistance by South African women against the state and multinational corporations which, simultaneously, threaten and exploit the reproduction of society and nature.

In the Global North feminism has tended to focus on the privatized nuclear family as a site of oppression. On the contrary, the predominant experience of African women is that the extended family was a site of resilience^x to be defended from the ravages of the apartheid system; a system of capitalism which operated on the creation of ‘cheap’ black working class. Black labour was ‘cheap’ because it forcibly removed men workers from the land and their households, and were paid barely enough to survive in “dilapidated housing near mines [and factories]” (Ness 2016, 15). Reproduction, sustenance and activities such as “caring for the very young and very old, the sick, the migrant labourer in periods of ‘rest’” (Wolpe 1972, 145) were borne by women. In addition, women farmed and tended to agriculture in the reserves (or bantustans as the tracts on lands designated for different ethnic groups came to be known) on land which was held under customary tenure. The proletarianization of the black working class relied fundamentally on the parallel, and geographically separate, spheres of agriculture and reproduction in rural reserves and the cheap labour system in the white, urban cities of apartheid South Africa. (Legassick and Wolpe 1976; Burawoy 1976) Thus, Legassick and Wolpe (1976) argue that apartheid as a complex economic, political and ideological machine operated on ‘partial proletarianization’, giving birth to a relative surplus population, whose “crucial function was”, as Wolpe (1972) argued previously, to maintain “the productive capacity of the pre-capitalists economies and the social system of the African societies.”^{xi} (Legassick and Wolpe 1976, 78).

In this vein, Burawoy (1976) argues, partial proleterianisation spared the apartheid state and economy the costs of educating and raising the migrant workers’ children, and of caring for the worker when he ^{xii}got too ill or old to work. These costs could be “externalized” to the homelands, predominantly populated by women, children and the elderly, where “the

requirements for a minimal standard of living was lower” while the migrant worker had to provide only for his own daily maintenance where “luxuries superfluous to the basic processes of renewal in the Bantustan or Mexican town or village become necessities in Johannesburg or California” (Burawoy 1976, 1082). He concludes his 1976 article by pointing out that while race was used to delineate “their different modes of insertion into the reproduction of labor power which determines their group characteristics”, the same applies for gender.

Thus, Burawoy (1976) argues, the articulation between the apartheid mode of production and social reproduction, is racialized and gendered. This apartheid, state-orchestrated separation between production and reproduction, entrenched and benefited from patriarchal customs which had cultural roots in African communities (Bozzoli 1983). While avoiding the pitfalls of ‘cultural reductionism’, as Bannerji (2015, 104) warns, Marxist-feminism has to consider that patriarchy has deep cultural roots. For this reason the gendered division of labour which ascribes women to unpaid domestic labour is often naturalized and unquestioned.

The legacy of this form of proletarianization is multi-fold for black women. Firstly, while women tended land in the erstwhile bantustans, Black peasant and working class women in post-apartheid South Africa, still struggle for access to land still held under customary, and patriarchal, tenure. Struggles over land - part of a national crisis on the redistribution of land, which cannot be fully captured in this article – rage on in a context where unemployment is 36%, with black women making up the biggest share of the unemployment rate at 60% (Statistics South Africa 2017). As rural agricultural economies declined as a result of complex factors^{xiii} the battle of sexes over how to use land intensified, with black men more in favor of using land for

grazing or the growing of marijuana crops (Ngonini 2001) and women favoring food crops.

Many of these women live under a crude form of patriarchy, often vested in traditional chiefs. As one participant in the recent Feminist Table workshop stated, “Our chief says he cannot speak to someone with a womb.” The legacy of apartheid for women is not only evident in their struggles for land, income and food security, the household itself is under threat.

As suggested above, the household is for many a site of stability. However, as pointed out by Mosoetsa (2011) this stability is fragile, and under constant threat of some of its members being drawn into flexible workplaces from where they could be summarily dismissed, while others are being denied access to land and work. Scarce resources - in a context of high unemployment, inadequate support from the state, increased commodification of basic services such as water provisioning and electrification, and rising food prices – become the center of conflict in poor households. A failing economy infused with patriarchal and corrupt politics, places undue burdens on households and fuels domestic violence. South Africa has the highest rate of femicide (women killed by their intimate partners) in the world, and one in five women older than 18 has experienced physical violence. But – and this is of crucial importance – the figure rises to one in three women in the poorest households. (Statistics South Africa 2016)

As familial care and relations have been disrupted by the partial proletarianization by the apartheid state (Budlender and Lund 2012), this pattern continues in contemporary South Africa, and is one of the reasons why only 35 per cent of children live with both their parents and 40 per cent live only with their mothers. An outcome of the apartheid creation of surplus populations, as well as the scourge of HIVAIDS, is the phenomenon of child-only households, where teenagers

and pre-teenagers perform reproductive labour in the absence of adult members who have either died from HIV/AIDS or who have migrated elsewhere for work (Fakier 2010). These households do not resort to the market to supply reproductive labour in the way that Northern households draws on migrant women (Farris 2015). Indeed, they are often the households which migrant women has left behind to conduct reproductive labour elsewhere.

Benya (2015) suggests that the concept social reproduction sheds light on how care for mineworkers in post-apartheid South Africa is conducted by women both in family units set up in migrant townships close to the mines as well as in family units in sending villages. Thus, she argues that in the Southern context the meaning of ‘family’ as a single unit needs to be challenged. What remains clear is that it is women who are the fulcrum of social reproduction and care. Her argument that struggles around mining is “as much about the mines – the workplace – as it [is] about the living conditions of workers and their families and the role of women, the ways in which they reproduce mine labour at no cost to capital, thus putting more pressure on the already resource-stretched households and communities.” (Benya 2015: 557) reflects not only on the inter-relationship between production and social reproduction but also on differences between women.

Benya’s argument mirrors Farris’s (2015) suggestion that traditional theories on surplus populations and social reproduction operated on the assumptions that a) women provide reproductive labour in their households for free; b) that men are the primary migrants engaged in productive labour and c) that both migrant and non-migrant women constitute a (floating) reserve army of labour while remaining “predominantly in charge of social reproduction.”

However, as Farris (2015) argues further, from the 1980s onwards, migration became increasingly feminized, not merely because the growth of service work, but also because middle class households which increasingly saw their women members entering the force, required the services of other women for reproductive labour. In South Africa domestic labour, Cock (1989) suggests, has been the fulcrum on which the privilege of white, middle class women rested. That is that the relationship between women reinforces class and racial inequalities.

Inequality between women in South Africa demonstrates how there is no viable conception of women as a universal social category. On the contrary the widespread exploitation of black women as domestic workers^{xiv} by other women illustrates the dominance of class. Under apartheid white women had the power to displace the responsibility for much of this domestic labour onto women of the subordinate classes. It is the convergence of class, race and gender relations that creates the particular vulnerability of domestic workers in South Africa. This racialized institution is now taking new forms which involve the continued displacement of domestic labour onto women of the subordinate classes by a growing black middle class and elite grouping^{xv}.

In post-apartheid South Africa gains for the black middle class are matched by the growing impoverishment of the working class. For many women the notion of gender equality is inadequate to the task of transformation, which has been reduced to the issue of representation. The current parliament has among the highest proportion of women representatives in the world and many women have been appointed to parliamentary committees, government departments and parastatals. But, these women have not always furthered the interests of working class

women. This is a common complaint against the competitive, individualist ethic at the center of liberal feminism. Feminism is to some extent contaminated by its association with protecting and advancing the interests of white, middle class women. The assertion of a new, radical black feminism could represent a decisive break with this conception.

Eco-feminist organizing in South Africa also has to take account of the hegemony of a particular form of neo-liberalism. More than two decades after South Africa's first non-racial democratic elections, "inequality is greater ... than at the end of Apartheid." (Oxfam 2014, 7) In South Africa, this report by Oxfam suggests, a platinum miner would need to work for 93 years just to earn the average CEO's annual bonus (2014, 15) in a context where the two richest people in have the same wealth as the bottom half of the population. This extreme economic inequality in South Africa, it is argued, emerges out of a turn towards neoliberal policies, which has resulted in increased levels of poverty and little security for the black working class (Barchiesi 2011; Saul 2012)

Neo-liberal capitalism does not only deepen economic inequality between people but also intensifies the inequality of material living conditions as this system exploits not only workers but also the planet to levels where neither can replenish nor sustain itself. As Fraser (2014) argues, capitalism thrives on the separation of human from the environment^{xvi}, not only with the aim of proletarianization but also to enforce the dominance of capital over 'nature' as a source of raw materials and over the destructive processes which wrest profits from mining and manufacturing operations. Vandana Shiva (2013, 18 and 90) who argues strongly for an ecological shift that "entails not seeing ourselves as outside the web of life" suggests that "the

dominant institutions shaped by capitalist patriarchy” thrive on ‘eco-apartheid by which she means, “the dualism that pits nature against humans.” The expansionist logic of capitalism threatens to destroy all forms of life. However, the black working class in South Africa are the most vulnerable to ecological devastation.

Working class South African women shoulder the twin burdens of procuring livelihoods in a context of high unemployment with limited access to land, and ensuring the daily and generational survival of their households and communities. The crisis of social reproduction relates to the high HIVAIDS infection rate; disrupted family relations and care; and the insecurity of work. (See Fakier and Cock 2009) At the same time, South Africa is in a state of ecological collapse, leading towards ecological catastrophe. A pattern of environmental racism continues despite the democratic constitution proclaiming the right of all “to live in an environment that is not harmful to health or wellbeing.” (Section 24 of the Bill of Rights). Millions of poor, black South Africans are exposed to what Nixon (2011) has called ‘the slow violence’ of toxic pollution in a process which is slow, insidious and largely invisible. Many black South Africans continue to live on the most damaged land, in the most polluted neighborhoods often adjoining working or abandoned mines, the coal fired power stations, steel mills, incinerators and waste sites or polluting industries, without adequate services of refuse removal, water, electricity and sanitation. In the Gauteng province alone over 1.6 million people live either on or adjacent to mine dumps in conditions contaminated with uranium and toxic heavy metals including arsenic, aluminum, manganese and mercury.

However, resistance to ecological devastation in South Africa, as in in other parts of the Global South is growing. A strong theme of eco-feminism has emerged amongst anti-capitalist activists. Activism, for example, against genetically modified products, such as wheat and maize, highlights not only the profit-driven machinations of “Big Food”, but also how the everyday consumption of these products harms nature and human bodies, and, importantly, also inhibits “our abilities to explore alternative and bottom-up understandings of food, health and well-being”. (Andrews and Lewis 2017, 4)

In South Africa, many working class struggles are moving beyond the point of production to the terrain of social reproduction. Much collective action framed as protests about service delivery or environmental justice are confronting lack of access to the material conditions necessary for social reproduction, such as access to clean air, water, adequate housing, and land for subsistence agriculture and so on. Women constitute the majority of people working to protect nature from the pollution and destruction driven by the expansionist logic of the capitalist system, and proposing an alternative relation between society and nature. Capital’s externalization of environmental costs frequently involves damage to nature such as polluted water and degraded land. It is women, through their role in social reproduction, who have to deal with these impacts in their communities. It is women who have to work harder in caring for those sick from polluted air. It is women who have to work harder (and walk further) to obtain clean water and to cultivate food crops on damaged land. Many of the participant organisations of the Feminist Table are engaged in environmental justice struggles. For example, the women of Xolobeni (a village on the Wild Coast of South Africa) against titanium mining, the women of Somkhele (a village in KwaZulu Natal) where anthracite mines have led to cracks in the homes of

surrounding communities due to blastings and illness from the coal dust that penetrates the air. Women are involved in these struggles because their role in social reproduction means 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. This imposes an extra burden of unpaid work on women.

Working class black women are active, and often driving, environmental and social justice initiatives confronting climate change, sometimes in survivalist, defensive and ameliorative ways, but also in challenging neo-liberal capitalism and promoting alternatives such as ‘food sovereignty’, ‘energy democracy’ and agro-ecology. It is largely women who are practicing food sovereignty which involves working with nature, through agro-ecology., instead of the reliance on harmful pesticides and chemicals as in industrial agriculture. These women are the ‘shock absorbers’ of the climate crisis in South Africa, experiencing most intensely the devastating impacts of rising food prices, water pollution and energy poverty (Jacobs, 2012; Munien and Ahmed, 2012)

Many of these women’s organisational initiatives are building counter power. For example Earthlife Africa, another regular participant of the Feminist Table, focuses on climate change, the impact of coal mining (especially on food security), the cost of electricity and the dangers of nuclear power, and is empowering grassroots women. The Earthlife Africa official who founded a Women, Energy and Climate Change Forum said,

People were having problems with pre-paid [water] meters. The majority of people in the protest marches and memos to the authorities were women. We focused on

education, on the impacts of climate change. We connected electricity with women's everyday issues.... In the Forum we had to demystify policy, especially climate change and energy policy which is often written in scientific, technical language. We had workshops, we went to people's homes, we met with parliament, Eskom^{xvii}, and government. We insisted on using our own language. So people became confident. Young women are beginning to stand up and feel confident about talking about energy issues. Women are putting a human face on the issue... (Key informant interview, Earthlife official, 2014)

Another initiative which empowers rural women involves concretizing the 'food water, energy nexus' through Earthlife's Sustainable Energy and Livelihoods Project. On seven sites throughout the country the project is establishing renewable energy technologies such as solar panels and biogas digesters as well as tanks for rainwater harvesting and food gardens. The focus of this project is on building resilience to climate change but it is also demonstrating a post-carbon future (Earthlife Africa 2014; Interview Earthlife Official, Johannesburg 2014.)

Many current women's struggles are against different forms of extractivism which involves intense air and water pollution, and dispossession as poor communities lose their lands and livelihoods. In the case of Steel Valley, for example, a once productive agricultural community near Vanderbijl Park, the externalization of environmental costs by a steel mill involved discharging contaminated waste water into an unlined dam which led to the toxic pollution of the groundwater on which lives and livelihoods depended. Crops failed, animals died and a survey of 500 residents revealed how the pollution was somatized in the form of genetic defects, cancers and kidney failures. There was also a social disintegration as the social bonds and relations of reciprocity and mutual aid were weakened. This toxic pollution of the air and groundwater imposed an extra burden of unpaid work for women in caring for the ill and dying. And it was

also women who provided much of the challenge to the steel mill to stop the pollution through the Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance. (Cock, 2007)

Another organization active in the Feminist Table since its inception is WoMin (Women in Mining) a regional alliance of organisations formed in 2013 which emphasizes the theme of solidarity among women against extractivism. (Interview, WoMin organiser, 2014). In 2015 it convened a gathering of activists of some 24 different organisations in the region calling for building “popular alliances against Big Coal” and a new form of development “that recognises and supports the work of care and reproduction” (WoMin Declaration 2015a). It pointed out that “women’s cheap and often unpaid labour, subsidises the profits of polluting coal corporations. Later in 2015 the WoMin African Gender and Extractives Alliance convened a gathering of more than 60 women activists in Nigeria and resolved to “unify our struggles through a women-led regional campaign for climate justice, energy, food and gender justice.” (Womin 2015b).

WAMUA, the women’s wing of (Mining Affected Communities United in Action (MACUA) focuses on the impact of mining on livelihoods in Mpumalanga which contains the most fertile land in the country and is threatened by 40 new coal mines. One of its members explained that, “It was decided to form a separate organization because when men and women are together men tend to dominate..... There are very limited numbers of such separate and autonomous women’s organisations in which women organise independently of the influence of men.... But we include many strong, energetic, young women. ” (Key informant interview, WAMUA organiser, 2014).

The explanation of women's preponderance in environmental struggles is not essentialist. It is not based on any natural affinity which women have with nature. 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 environment. This is not always recognized in the eco-feminist approach.

While encompassing a diversity of approaches, eco-feminism claims that women have a specific relationship to nature. For example, Salleh (1997, 75) maintains that women's domestic labour is work that "mediates nature for men." An eco-feminist framework suggests that women's experience in the production and provision of food could mean that they are more positioned to promote a new narrative about our relationship with nature; a re-valuing of nature as something more than a store of natural resources for economic activity to be utilized for short-term gain without concern for long-term survival. As Holmstrom writes "feminism that speaks of women's oppression and its injustice but fails to address capitalism will be of little help in ending women's oppression." (Holmstrom 2002, 2) To free women means deep, transformative change because of the way patriarchy and capitalism are intertwined and requires a focus on the material conditions under which women live and work. The Feminist Table addresses these interconnections.

CONCLUSION

The Feminist Table is one of a growing number of grassroots feminist initiatives. For example, one participating organization, the Northern Cape branch of the Surplus People's Project, has

initiated its own regional workshops which replicate the model of the Feminist Table. Another Western Cape organization, the Rita Edwards Collective, adopted the theme of care work as its 2016 programme and thereby drew into their network conversations about care with religious groups, academics at other universities and organisations who work on issues of reproductive health with young women and girl children.

More importantly, since the establishment of the Feminist Table six years ago, a number of other initiatives have emerged to promote feminist analysis at the grassroots. Examples are the WoMin the Rural Women's Assembly (RWA) organization of Feminist Schools. WoMin's second Feminist School in 2017 aimed "to make visible the exploitation of women and nature" It involved 46 participants from 11 countries in Africa. The RWA, formed in 2009, brings together some 500 community based organisations working on food and land issues. It describes itself as "a self-organized network or alliance of national rural women's movements, assemblies, grassroots organisations and chapters of mixed peasant unions, federations and movements across 8 countries in the SADC region." (Key informant interview, RWA, 2012). In September 2013 it brought together almost 50 rural women to a Feminist School and Strategy Meeting to raise awareness.

The outcome of these initiatives is a kind of dialogic solidarity grounded in an awareness of the linkages between capitalism and patriarchy, and recognition of 'the complex and 'intersecting oppressions' involving race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity and (dis) ability in which these women are embedded (Hill Collins 2008, 18). The realisation that has emerges at these events is the shared recognition that what are experienced as individual problems are social

issues with social causes and social solution that require women's collective action. But this is not necessarily framed in term of feminism.

Few of these grassroots women in the Feminist Table would describe themselves as feminists. Feminism is still widely viewed as elitist and concerned with individual advancement rather than collective empowerment. It is not embraced as a label, or a set of political actions but a form of solidarity. For most of the women in the Feminist Table feminism is not an alternative vision but a way of life, a way of practicing a commitment to collective action and solidarity.

However the reproductive work black working class women do outside the market in two specific spaces the household and the environment, contains a transformative potential. Collective non-marketized arrangements such as co-operative food gardens, sewing, bulk buying, seed saving, shared child care, people's restaurants are all new social forms which could point to an alternative society. Much of the social context in which the Feminist Table operates is generally applicable to the Global South. In these countries rising rates of unemployment, precarious jobs and environmental damage all undermine the significance of working class women's unpaid work. Both in South Africa and globally in this moment of economic and ecological crisis, a Marxist feminist anti-capitalist politics could generate a transnational solidarity that is larger and more powerful than anything we have yet seen. Such a politics requires both Marxism for its critique of capitalism and the class inequalities on which it is based, and feminism for its commitment to the abolition of gender and race, as well as class-based, inequality. The politicization of the concept of social reproduction promotes a

transformative feminism that is grounded in the material realities of the global south, and that is part of an anti-capitalist struggle to end all forms of oppression and exploitation.

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Endnotes

ⁱ This paper draws on informal conversations and key informant interviews, as well as our experience participating in various initiatives trying to develop an eco-socialist - feminism in South Africa during the last five years.

ⁱⁱ This song protests against the demeaning treatment of domestic workers and gardeners which are large categories of black vulnerable workers in South Africa.

ⁱⁱⁱ In August 2012, the massacre by the South African police of 34 mineworkers outside a mining town, called Marikana, heralded a turning point in post-apartheid politics in South Africa (Alexander 2013). This event portrayed not only the ongoing class struggle between mining companies, trade unions, workers and the state, but also provided fuel for public protests, wildcat downing of tools, inter-union fights and strikes in the mining industry and beyond. Not only was the highest number of public protests recorded in 2012 (Alexander 2013: 613), but resistance to the state and capital took the form of worker and community alliances. Arguably, it was the women of Marikana who kept strikers going, and importantly, illustrated the inter-relationship between the mines (production) and home and community (reproduction). About this moment in South African history, Asanda Benya argues:

“Marikana collapses the distinction between home and work; it was as much about the mines – the workplace – as it was about the living conditions of workers and their families and the role of women, the ways in which they reproduce mine labour at no cost to capital, thus putting more pressure on the already resource-stretched households and communities”. (Benya 2015: 557)

^{iv} The Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) is a German foundation which funds social democratic forms of organisation internationally. It has continued to fund the Feminist Table on an annual basis, with no influence over the programme.

^v As discussed in the section above.

^{vi} 53% of South Africans experience hunger on a regular basis.

^{vii} One third of all food produced is wasted.

^{viii} The precise ‘value’ was the subject of the ‘Domestic Labour Debate’ in the 1970s.

^{ix} See Fakier and Cock 2009

^x See also the work of Angela Davis and Hazel Carby who also argued that the family provided strength and hope for Black families in Northern contexts such as the US and the UK.

^{xi} This is similar to Lise Vogel’s writing on the complex relationship between social reproduction and modern capitalism. (Vogel 2013)

^{xii} As Farris (2015) points out in previous iterations of surplus populations, migrant workers in ‘productive’ work were men, while women, migrant and non-migrant, provided reproductive labour.

^{xiii} Such as over-farming; decline of income as urban employment fell, competition with white agriculturalist who benefitted from support from the apartheid state, and the migration of women to cities in search of income and independence.

^{xiv} The second largest occupational category of black women in South Africa.

^{xv} Writing of the US Brenner maintains that “Class divisions among black women have grown wider. The upward mobility of the black middle class has weakened the base of the civil rights movement, and the visible success of some black women obscures and mystifies the continuing systematic and institutionalized racism that disadvantages the majority.” (Brenner, 2002:336)

^{xvi} What Marx called “a metabolic rift”.

^{xvii} The national provider of electricity.