



**ZABALAZA  
FOR SOCIALISM**

## **Why an Ecofeminist Socialist Politics?**

*For Discussion, Dec 2023*

### **Introduction**

In 2023, close to 30 years after ‘liberation’, black working-class women are more likely to be unemployed<sup>1</sup>, food insecure<sup>2</sup>, lacking access to the most basic social services, and on top of this confronting the widespread scourge of gendered violence<sup>3</sup>. Read together, and against a broken health and education system, and rapidly rising electricity, food and transport prices, the ability of poor households to reproduce themselves is extremely tenuous. The growing ecological and climate crisis<sup>4</sup>, combined with a state hollowed out by privatisation and corruption and incapable of addressing poverty, as well as a looming debt crisis deeply threaten the working class and black working-class women. Because of the gender, race and class differentiations outlined above, black working-class women carry the greatest burden of the crisis of social reproduction.

The dominant orientation to ‘women’ and gender in South Africa, in government, Chapter Nine institutions, and mainstream civil society is liberal and has failed most South African women. Liberal middle class

---

<sup>1</sup> At the end of 2022, black African women suffered an expanded unemployment rate of 51% as compared with Black African men at 44%, white men at 7%, and white women at 13.6%.

<sup>2</sup> In 2021, 15 percent (2,6 million) and 6 percent (1,1 million) of households indicated that they had inadequate and severely inadequate access to food, respectively. Like poverty patterns, Black African and Coloured households, female-headed households, and households in rural areas are more likely to experience food insecurity than their counterparts in the urban context.

<sup>3</sup> South Africa is without dispute one of the most violent countries in the world. In the last quarter of 2022, 169 sexual offences were reported every day. Considering that most women do not report for fear of victimisation or rape by a policeman, the stats are much higher than this. One third of even 50% of women and girls aged 15 and older have experienced physical or sexual intimate partner violence. Violence against LGBTIQ people remains commonplace and underreported. Murder of women and girls, in acts of femicide, is the most extreme form of gender-based violence (GBV) with South Africa being known for having one of the highest rates of femicide in the world.

<sup>4</sup> Sub-Saharan Africa is warming faster than anywhere else in the world – the global average temperature increase since the start of the industrial revolution in the UK and Europe sits at 1.1 degrees Celsius, whilst sub-Saharan Africa has experienced a 1.4 degree increase in temperature. The Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) projects that temperatures over the South African interior will rise by 1.5 to 2 times the global rate in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In respect of the ecological crisis, South Africa is classified as one of 17 ‘mega biodiverse’ (with high numbers of unique species) countries in the world. The loss of habitat and degradation of the environment in South Africa has led to 14% of plants, 17% of mammals and 15% of birds being threatened with extinction. These threats rise steeply with climate warming.

gender activists and feminists search for 'equity' and better treatment/ opportunity within the dominant capitalist racist system. They focus their efforts on 'breaking through the glass ceiling' to work alongside men, on an equal basis, in public entities and the private sector. The second line of effort is improving women's participation and representation in politics, national legislatures, and municipal councils. Despite women having significant representation in national parliament, rising to 43% in 2009, working-class women have experienced no benefit. In fact, their situation has worsened if one considers the statistics presented on the previous page. The third line of work taken up by gender activists and liberal feminists addresses violence against women by training men in institutions, such as the police and the courts. This assumes that men perpetrate violence because they don't know any better. A more radical, class-nuanced, and feminist social analysis concludes differently; that violence against women lies in the system of patriarchy in terms of which women are considered inferior and subject to the control of men. This rests in part on the dominant gender division of labour in terms of which women are expected to cook, clean and care of children and the elderly, and be at the service of men and their needs, including sexually. The valuable work that women do every day to reproduce workers and family members, even communities, is invisible and undervalued.

Liberal feminism can only fail most women in South Africa and the world, and in the sections to follow the axes upon which a radical ecological feminist socialism can be constructed are outlined as the starting point for DAF. But first let us turn to understanding better the relationship between capitalism and the social and ecological crises we confront as a society.

### ***The origins of the ecological and climate crisis in South Africa***

The ecological crises, including the climate crisis, which we confront in South Africa and across the globe is deeply rooted in the capitalist system and its expansionist logic organised around the accumulation of wealth in the form of capital. Capitalist economies are geared to the growth of profits in the shortest time frame which requires economic growth at any cost. Growth = increased consumption = increased production of goods with high exchange and low use value leading to rapid and expanding absorption of energy and materials resulting in higher and higher levels of toxic wastes dumped into the environment and emissions causing climate change.

The rise of industrial capitalism, linked to imperialism, and western science resulted in the separation of humans from nature (nature outside of self) in stark contrast to pre-capitalist/subsistence modes of production characterised by a close and symbiotic relationship to nature. Under capitalism, nature is reduced to a commodity to be traded on the market for profit and all social relations between people and all the relationships of humans to nature are reduced to money relations.

The capitalist mode of production is linear – extraction – transportation – beneficiation – sale with external social and environmental costs at every point. The costs of production – pollution, land grabs, ill-health, loss of livelihoods, increased care work - are externalised to people, especially women and their unpaid care work, as well as workers, nature and ultimately the state as the supplier of public and social services. These social and economic costs are not a simple by-product of production but are instead an intrinsic and necessary feature of profit-based economies (Neeves, V 2012). Kapp, a leading ecological economist in the 40s and 50s, who conceptualised the theory of social costs, concludes that the capitalist economy is an “economy of unpaid costs”. In this, nature is treated as a free or cheap input or ‘sink’ for costs of production. In short, it does not matter where something goes unless it does not inhibit profit.

The externalisation of social and economic costs is deeply gendered and classed. Because of the gender division of labour between men and women, within specific contexts, women are responsible for putting food on the household (which in the rural context especially translates to women growing, processing, and cooking the food), and for taking care of the young and ill. When workers fall ill because of polluting industries, and/ or children contract illness from a polluted environment, it is women and their unpaid labour that absorbs the costs. In addition, women in peasant communities and urban settings are typically the ones who help mop up poisonous spills onto land and waterways. Ecofeminist socialists contend that working class women are the sponges of the fallout of a capitalist mode of production, and therefore heavily subsidise the accumulation process.

Neoliberal capitalism is also responsible for the deep erosion in available public and social services as governments around the world follow the prescriptions of the IFIs, dominant Northern governments, and foreign investors. The state has become a site for accumulation with the transfer of assets and services from the state into private hands to provision the same for profit. This process has escalated as the functionality of the state has been eroded by successive waves of structural adjustment as well as corruption, resulting in the collapse of public institutions. The Political Crisis paper well articulates how the black bourgeoisie have benefitted from the raiding of public funds in the absence of opportunities for capital accumulation through the market.

The impacts of privatisation are also deeply gendered and raced. With the erosion of our education system, health care services, and bulk infrastructure for water and electricity delivery, combined with the hollowing out of the state’s ability to deliver, it is working class communities in the rural and urban context who suffer the most. Given the gendered division of labour within households, and the preponderance of women-headed households, it is working class women who step in to make up for broken or absent public services. This is yet another layer of oppression which women confront.

***Building an ecofeminist anti-racist decolonial socialism***

Ecofeminism, which emerged in the 1970s, emphasised the critical connection between women and nature, with women being called upon to lead an ecological revolution fundamentally reshaping the relations between humanity and nature.

Ecofeminism was preceded by different feminist paradigms – radical feminism; liberal feminism (outlined above and the dominant feminism in South Africa and globally); socialist feminism; anarchist feminism; and decolonial/black feminism. On our continent the latter is also expressed as African feminism and emphasises the experiences of and burdens on black women in Africa impacted by histories of imperialism, colonisation, and neo-colonisation under a neo-liberal capitalist system.

There are three main political orientations within ecofeminism – (a) liberal ecofeminism akin to what has been described above but emphasising the need to protect the environment by reforming laws and policies within the existing dominant economic and political system. (b) cultural/spiritual ecofeminism, which is essentialist in nature, arguing that women and nature are similarly oppressed by patriarchy, and that the fight against patriarchy will liberate women and nature. (c) ecofeminist socialism/materialism which locates the oppression of women, indigenous peoples, and peasants in western industrialised patriarchal capitalism. They contend that capitalism and patriarchy must be overthrown together for nature, women, and all of humanity to be genuinely liberated. The latter is the orientation we contend should shape DAF's emergent politics.

Ariel Salleh (one of the most prominent ecofeminist materialists) argues that capitalism, patriarchy and the colonisation and exploitation of peoples in the 'global South'<sup>5</sup> must be simultaneously fought and overcome in an ecofeminist materialist orientation. She and other materialist feminists, like Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies and Silvia Federici, contend that these systems are interwoven in shaping the oppression of women and nature, and that the liberation of all women, peoples, and nature rests on the overthrow of capitalism and the rebuilding of an economy on very different terms serving different ends. As well, patriarchy must be placed at the forefront of struggles against capitalism, and our imagination of a world post-capitalism must include the deepest commitment to overcoming the oppression of women. No-one can be free if women are not free.

Dominant global geopolitical relations continue to perpetuate the colonisation of countries, and their working classes, especially women, across our continent. Unequal global power relations, riven with racism, are a significant determinant in who flourishes and who starves, and who lives and who dies, with the racialised bodies of peoples, and women in the global south, suffering the violence and oppression of deeply unequal and violent neo-colonial and imperial relations at a global scale. South Africa and parts of North Africa are somewhat divergent in their levels of development and industrialisation, with the remnants

---

<sup>5</sup> The term 'global South' is more expansive than traditional historical definitions. This term refers to working class people in the traditional global South and in the global South which exists in industrialised countries in the traditional global North, as well as emerging industrial nations.

of national capital exploiting cheap labour in other countries, their environment and ultimately destroying the small industries which have been permitted to develop there.

An ecofeminist materialist position demands a fundamental reshaping of the relations between humans and nature. This disconnect lies at the core of patriarchal capitalism and is at the root of the deep ecological and climate crisis the world confronts. This perspective specifically calls on us to adopt a critical approach to modernisation, which refers to the transition from a traditional, rural, agrarian society to a secular, urban, industrial society. Industrialisation is the key motor of modernisation. Industrialisation, without doubt, demands the extraction and use of natural resources, at a significant scale, and results in the range of externalised costs mentioned earlier in this position piece. Industrialisation is, of course, necessary to the production of goods and services which people need to have a good life - better health care, public transport including roads, technologies to support agro-ecologically based production and so on. But how do we work to draw a line in the sand? What industrialisation is needed to support basic needs and an improved quality of life of most citizens? Industrialisation which supports the production of goods demanded by the bourgeoisie and the middle classes – is this acceptable? Industrialisation to deliver public services which benefit corporations? Industrialisation for export on unequal terms? These are some of the questions which would need to be answered in determining what industrialisation is needed, at what time, and benefitting whom.

Similar questions must also be raised in respect of the extractivist sectors. Geopolitically, countries of the Global South have for a century or more performed a particular role in a global and territorial division of labour – the provision of cheap raw materials and low-cost labour in a system of global capitalism. Other regions and countries (the traditional Global North, BRICS, and other emerging national economies) take on the role of producing manufactured goods and then shipping finished products back to the countries which have furnished the raw materials in the first instance. “The former export Nature, the latter import it” (Acosta, A, no date). An ecofeminist materialist orientation demands a deep rethink and transformation of the dominant extractivist mode of production. The idea of post-extractivism posited by key thinkers in Latin America, offers us some guidance on a position. The extraction of resources occurs but on very different terms, such as national production according to the needs of most working-class people, the creation of work in the areas of artisanal mining, which is coming to predominate as the climate crisis deepens and options for livelihoods diminish. But clear parameters are established as to when extraction should not occur – when the ecological impacts are great, when people are asserting NO, when the terms of trade are unequal, when the interests of future generations is paramount and so on.

Traditional Marxism is accused of separating the spheres of production and reproduction. Socialist feminists have addressed this and pointed to the deep intersection between these two spheres. Ecofeminist materialists stretch the position of socialist feminists further. Ariel Salleh (2009) argues that it is the reproductive work of women, indigenous people, and peasant farmers (reproductive workers, who labour

on an unpaid basis) who “provide use values” (food for household consumption, care, sex and so on), and maintain and regenerate the very conditions of production, including the future labour force of capitalism. She argues that it is the reproductive work in the fields (not industrial agriculture) and in the homes that maintain a harmonious relationship with nature (what she calls the humanity-nature metabolism), regenerating and restoring natural resources and human relations, and enabling the global economy to continue functioning.

Reproductive workers in the South and mothers and care givers in the North labour at the point where labour and humanity meet (in the fields, the forests, the nursery etc.) and their work “demonstrates a good metabolic fit between human needs and biological growth.” (Salleh, 2009:4) Without their regenerative/restorative labour, humanity could not exist. This is in contrast with capitalist industrialisation, and processes such as extractivism, which destabilise the humanity-nature relationship, creating a ‘metabolic rift’ or rupture, the source of environmental degradation and climate change. She argues powerfully that these reproductive workers are practicing an alternative grassroots economics and an alternative epistemology (knowledge system/science), and for our purposes then offer us the outline of an alternative paradigm – addressing a different relationship between humanity and nature, between human beings, and a different way of living (eco self-sufficiency) from which we (practitioners and activists) must learn and draw inspiration from.

Federici make the important point that the feminist concept of reproductive work is deeply subversive – by making visible the ‘unfree’ nature of reproductive work, that is its bondage to the capitalist system through the production and reproduction of the capitalist’s most indispensable means of production: the worker, and by revealing the contradictions which inhere in social reproduction, the possibility of “alliances between producers and reproduced – mothers and children, teachers and students, nurses and patients” are made possible.

Mies, part of the Bielefeld ecofeminist school, speaks of the subsistence perspective, closely allied to the concept of social reproduction. The subsistence perspective claims to offer a new paradigm which places life in the centre and not economic growth and profit-making (Mies, 2005). Subsistence production is defined as “any and all work that is expended in the creation, recreation, and support of life and living.” Key principles of the subsistence perspective include: (a) the ‘re-embedding’ of the economy into society which will help bring a ‘good life for all’; (b) the redefinition of the good life away from the existing production and consumption system (somewhat akin to the indigenous Latino notion of *buen vivir* – living well); (c) a transformation in all dominant social relations (humans to nature, men to women, city to countryside, relations between nations etc.); (d) the elimination of patriarchal capitalist relations, and in particular, the valorisation of all work – housewives, peasants, artisans etc.- related to the production and reproduction of life; and (e) technology that serves a life-centred subsistence economy and society (Mies, 2005).

Finally, placing ecofeminist materialism in the African context demands the adoption of a Pan Africanist perspective constructed from below by women, working class communities and peasants. Pan-Africanism, an ideology and political movement, has its origins in the struggles of all African peoples against five centuries of enslavement and colonisation. It aims to unify Africans on the continent and in the diaspora, all bound by a common history and destiny, and reclaim African peoples from colonisation, neo-colonisation, and imperialism.

The Organisation of African Unity (OAU) was a first effort to institutionalise Pan-Africanism by fostering unity and solidarity between African countries. The OAU was weakened by the lack of implementation mechanisms and by the non-binding status of assembly resolutions (Adebayo 2020). More profoundly, the OAU failed to bring down imposed national boundaries, deconstruct nationalities, and create a unified African sovereignty. If these actions had been undertaken, they would have powerfully unmade the decisions of the infamous 1884-1885 Berlin Conference<sup>6</sup> and unlocked a revolutionary process of continent-wide decolonisation and a reimagination and remaking of Africa and its peoples.

The Pan-African Parliament and African Union, more contemporary, have replicated the same disappointments and failed to offer up a transformative vision of the continent. Instead, states continue to compete for elusive foreign investment, trade deals and loans, in this way facilitating the continued plunder of Africa's resources on highly unjust terms, and perpetuating Africa's highly marginalised geopolitical positioning.

While the formal institutionalisation of Pan-Africanism has not yielded what the continent and its peoples need for genuine socio-economic, political, and cultural liberation, Pan-African civil society activism and solidarity has ebbed and flowed and is now experiencing a comeback. This organising has taken different forms and assumed different politics and includes networking and activism targeting the sub-regional blocs, solidarity campaigns, alliance building within linguistic blocs, and genuine attempts at building Pan-African organisation.

This informs a new imagination about the Africa its peoples need, drawing from an abundant living praxis, and informed by a rich history of African philosophy, spirituality, and movement. A revitalised Pan-Africanism must be built from below by African citizens, wedded in demand and solidarity across nations, and rooted in their daily practices and relations with each other and Mother Nature. The solidarity of African women across the continent to stop mega projects, condemn repression and violence, and demand climate justice must be our lodestar, building on and drawing from a long tradition of progressive Pan-Africanism.

### ***What does this all mean for what DAF stands for and what we take up internally?***

---

<sup>6</sup> The Berlin Conference of fourteen countries in Europe and North America, without the presence of a single African country, agreed to the balkanisation of Africa into 50 nation states.

1. The people carrying the interlaced fallout of racist heterosexual ecocidal capitalism are black working class and peasant women. They constitute the majority of the oppressed and excluded. If we are a left formation which works with movements to support the liberation of the majority of black South Africans then, by necessity, we must work to address the systems which oppress women.
2. Black working-class women are burdened by the many crises we have mentioned. They are also primarily responsible within their families and communities for the daily reproduction or remaking of humanity/labour. Because of this socio-economic location, most black working-class women hold the interests of their families and communities first. Women's gendered social location gives us an explanation for why women mobilise first to defend their communities, expand basic social services, guarantee safety for their children and family members. In short, women are most likely to mobilise first.
3. No mass movement for socialism can be organized without responding to the forms of oppression experienced by black women, LGBTIQ people, single mothers, and young women. We cannot expect people to join our movement by telling them to put their issues on hold for the sake of some ill-defined "unity" later. Solidarity is the bridge by which different groups of people connect based on mutual understanding, respect, and fulfilling the old socialist edict that an injury to one is an injury to all.
4. All forms of institutionalized oppression enslave the oppressed and the oppressor. Men are enslaved by society's expectations of them as 'household head' and not members who contribute to the wellbeing and fate of the collective, by norms about what it means to be a man (strong, without feelings, violent) which suppresses so much of what it means to be human and deprived of a deep connection to their children. Organising to dismantle patriarchy liberates men and women, boys, and girls.

Our tasks within DAF must encompass the following:

1. Prioritise cadre support to popular formations and movements of working-class women in the rural and urban contexts. And invest focused support to the organising of young black working-class women.
2. Grow the cadreship of black working class and peasant women leaders within the DAF as a matter of priority.
3. Form a women's leadership structure within the DAF. This structure will have an inward looking (transformation) perspective and an outlooking women's movement building orientation.



4. Conceptualise, write and advance a radical Pan African Ecofeminist Socialist perspective to be advanced through concrete solidarity, common campaigns and joined up actions of women's movements across the continent.
5. Ensure that all political education programmes of DAF address the diversity of people's experience of racialised heteronormative capitalism; confront men's power over women of the same class, race, and sexual orientation; and consider what specific interventions are needed to reach women and address the specific oppressions they face as women.
6. Create spaces to connect women across geographies, sexual orientation, ages, locations etc. to forge mutual understanding and solidarity.
7. ZERO tolerance for language and actions which disrespect women, undermine their bodily autonomy, and minimise the seriousness of women's oppression.
8. Representation? At least 50% of leadership in different structures and at different levels of the organisation shall be women. Phase different proportions over time?
9. Ensure that childcare is provided at every gathering of DAF, including at branch level.
10. Time meetings at branch level so that women and their reproductive responsibilities are recognised and respected.
11. Build 'concrete' campaigns that centre social reproduction in tackling austerity, debt, the climate crisis, and support for adaptation, right to food etc.