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A critical exploration of Pan-African ecofeminist popular education within WoMin's feminist schools

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ABSTRACT

WoMin African Alliance (WoMin) has hosted six Feminist Schools since 2016 in which a Pan-African ecofeminist popular education approach has evolved. The participants are women in communities of resistance against extractive projects in West, East, and Southern Africa. Given the limited research on ecofeminist popular education in Africa, an exploratory case study method is used to examine the praxis of the emergent curriculum. Most participants have limited levels of formal schooling; therefore, we probe how we build an understanding of complex theoretical ideas while simultaneously honouring the centrality of women's embodied knowledge. We describe various participatory, inventive pedagogical practices which place women's experiences at the centre while elucidating abstract concepts. The facilitator's ability to weave theory from the stories while 'on her feet' is crucial. The case deepens the argument that experience is a source of knowledge and provides rich evidence to support it.

KEYWORDS

Feminist popular education; ecofeminism; Pan-Africanism; feminist schools; cognitive justice

Introduction

WoMin African Alliance (WoMin) has hosted six Feminist Schools since 2016 where we have evolved Pan-African ecofeminist popular education approaches. The participants, who are all included in the case study, are women in communities of resistance against extractive projects – mining, plantations, and large energy projects in West, East, and Southern Africa. Given that there is limited research on feminist popular education in Africa, even less on ecofeminist popular education, an exploratory case study approach is used to examine the praxis of an emergent curriculum within the schools.

WoMin's popular education supports African women's resistance to violent extractivist developments. It is shaped by the understanding that deep structural change is necessary to transform exploitative systems that result in poverty and the immiseration

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of affected women and their communities. WoMin's theory of change has at its heart leadership and grassroots organising by peasant and working-class women. WoMin's strategies are shaped by the imperative to support these women with information, analytical and strategic skills, to deepen their consciousness and actions against harmful extractives and large development projects such as dams and power stations (Meer 2019).

Given that most participants have limited levels of written literacy and formal schooling, as part of the exploration of the emergent curriculum, we pursue a key question for feminist popular educators. Namely, how do we build understanding of complex theoretical ideas while simultaneously honouring the centrality of women's embodied knowledge?

We start by situating ourselves and describing the research approach. We then present WoMin in context before moving to a discussion of 'conceptual coordinates'. These are bodies of thought and theory that have influenced the shaping of the schools and provide a framework for excavating the emergent curriculum. Presentation and analysis of educational practices in the schools follow thereafter.

Research approach

We adopt an exploratory case study approach to examine the emergent curriculum within the schools. This is appropriate as research on feminist and ecofeminist popular education in Africa is limited. Rule and John (2011, p. 8) state that exploratory case studies utilise qualitative research methods to explore phenomena that have not been investigated deeply and they lay the basis for further study. Our intention is to describe and explore ecofeminist popular education approaches within the schools as a basis to pursue further questions later, including those relating to the impacts of participation on participants and communities.

We have been involved in the schools in various ways between one and eight years. We are all feminist activists; all except Shirley have facilitated within a WoMin feminist school. We inevitably draw on our experiences as embedded activist researchers, organisers, and educators. Winnet and Maggie are based in Zimbabwe and Leila, Sam, and Shirley are based in South Africa.

We have permission to access historical documents from WoMin, some of which are in the public domain, and some are internal school-related documents. We draw on these together with all our lived experiences. These provide material for rich description and critical analysis of theoretical underpinnings and methodologies within the emergent curriculum.

In addition, we held an online guided, three-hour, reflective conversation amongst ourselves plus two additional, core, school facilitators from West Africa. The conversations were recorded and transcribed. Arising from this interaction, we resolved as part of the study of the emergent curricula, to probe our teaching of theories while simultaneously honouring the centrality of women's embodied knowledge (Michelson 2015). This aspect is particularly challenging, given the limited written literacy and formal schooling.

Pictures of participants' realities are gleaned from their evaluations and our own experiences. Also, the documentary film made by WoMin, *Women Hold up the Sky*

(WoMin producer 2021), provides vivid depictions of rurally based women who have been part of the schools.

A case study is always situated in a particular context. As the schools are embedded within WoMin, we now turn to provide a brief background to WoMin and the context it inhabits.

WoMin Africa alliance

To contextualise the genesis of WoMin (derived from the words 'women' and 'mining'), we provide an extract from activist, Gladys Mavhusa who describes a common experience of African women in the mines. She describes how the mining activities in the diamond fields of Marange, Zimbabwe, disrupted her and her community's way of life, and endangered women:

> They displaced us from our lands and stripped away our freedom of movement. When our land became a restricted area, it meant that there was a boom gate to enter our town. This is where public transport would stop and the "officials" there would perform strip searches. Women would be searched in our mouths, our ears, everywhere, including private parts. Sometimes these officers did not change their gloves, using the same one on many women to the point that some of us began to develop infections (Mapondera and Hargreaves 2021, p. 141).

In the stories and experiences of women regarding the egregious impacts of extractives lies the genesis of WoMin. WoMin was launched in October 2013 as a regional alliance to support women's organising and movement-building to resist destructive extractivism and propose the needed development alternatives from an African ecofeminist perspective (Mapondera and Hargreaves 2021).

WoMin works to advance change through research, feminist schools, exchanges, solidarity, organising, and campaigns in partnership with organisations in thirteen countries across, West, Central, East, and Southern Africa. WoMin partners with one or two organisations in each country, with whom they share complementary perspectives and strategies.

In 2014, WoMin considered how best to support feminist movement-building through political formation. In August of that year, WoMin cooperated with the Southern African Rural Women's Assembly (RWA) and the Open Society Initiative of Southern Africa (OSISA) to convene a regional dialogue and exchange between key feminist political education and leadership efforts. Out of this grew a WoMin Feminist Movement-Building School, held in March 2016, which was undertaken in partnership with Just Associates (JASS), an international feminist movement support organisation rooted in the Global South, with extensive feminist popular education experience. Their support was important, and the collaboration deeply influenced the feminist popular education orientation and approach to movement-building. Subsequent Schools have built on lessons and provocations made in this early history. The schools are an important part of an ecology of strategies to support women's organising and movement building within WoMin.

Before describing the schools, we turn now to an elaboration of conceptual coordinates that we will use to analyse and discuss the emergent curriculum.

Conceptual coordinates

Conceptual coordinates can be viewed like coordinates on a map. They are theoretical positions that we can use to plot our way. In the case of this article, we are plotting the emergent curriculum of the schools, and the ways complex theoretical ideas are taught while simultaneously honouring the centrality of women's embodied knowledge. To do this we draw on bodies of thought and theory that have influenced the shaping of the schools. The evolving popular educational approaches are Pan-African and ecofeminist. We move now to discuss each of the concepts: popular education, ecofeminism, and Pan-Africanism, and how they cohere, to frame the analysis.

Popular education

The radical traditions of education that grapple with the systemic roots of oppressive conditions have been theorised in the scholarship of popular education and social movement learning, amongst others (Kuk and Tarlau 2020, Clover *et al*. 2022, Finnegan and Cox 2023, von Kotze and Walters 2023). Ecofeminist popular education nests within this scholarship. Its contribution is the emphasis on the interconnections amongst capitalism, patriarchy, racism, colonialism, and the natural environment.

There are at least four traditions of popular education (von Kotze *et al*. 2016). We relate most strongly to radical traditions which link to Freire's 'pedagogy of the oppressed' (Freire 1972, Ismail 2015). Radical traditions thrive in times of heightened socio-economic and political contestation, in opposition to poverty, racism, misogyny, and climate injustice, amongst others. As Burt *et al*. (2020) attest, popular education is rooted in the interests, aspirations, and struggles of ordinary people. It is participatory, dialogical, inventive, community-oriented – fosters critical consciousness and collective production of emancipatory knowledge and praxis. The affinities between feminist practice and popular education are easy to see. Both subscribe to conceptions of pedagogy that are supported, by unfolding processes that involve participants actively exploring new ways of thinking about their situations as they (re)conceive of themselves as actors in the world.

Popular education seeks to draw on collective knowledge and experiences of struggles, on historical understandings, to develop coherent theory and practice to challenge the individualised, commodified, socio-economic world. Earlier popular education was criticised by feminist scholars, (see, for example, Mtetwa 2023) who pointed to the universalist, masculinist, and rationalist assumptions. Mohanty (2012) succinctly provides the essence of feminist popular education:

> Feminist popular education provides innovative feminist pedagogical and methodological lenses that allow us to 'see', analyse, and enact pedagogies of personal, cultural, and political resistance to inherited patriarchal and misogynist practices. It offers pedagogic and transformative practices, designed to speak truth to power, and transform ourselves in the pursuit of gender justice (Mohanty 2012, p. viii).

A central tension within popular education is the difference between the 'learners' and 'educators'. As Freire (1972, p. 46) argues, "Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the

contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students". 'Popular' education, as its name implies, focuses on a distinct constituency of learners – the oppressed, and the marginalised. Feminist popular education works with variously marginalised women and communities; it assumes a relationship of solidarity and collaboration between educators and learners. But as Manicom and Walters (2012, p. 9) state, this does not necessarily absolve modernist, colonialist assumptions. In fact, the challenges of forging ethical and decolonising relations of solidarity are intense, for there are invariably class, geographical, and sometimes racialised differences, between educators and communities of learners. Being a 'teacher', and being more formally educated, confers authority and responsibility complicated by class, culture, race, language, origin, and psychic associations.

Popular educators embrace both the politics and ethics of 'working across differences', and negotiation of relational privilege and inequalities in collaborative ventures. Feminist popular education, with its expressed political commitment to address relations of dominance, is an important space for contesting and refining politics of solidarity.

Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism brings together feminism and ecology and has developed in the Global North since the 1970s both as a theory and movement (Gough *et al*. 2024). Randriamaro (2024, p. 183) describes African eco-feminism as originating much earlier. She provides examples showing how the association between women and Nature has been made by feminist movements in Eastern Africa in the nineteenth century.

Ecofeminists argue the inseparable connection amongst capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism, racism, and ecological breakdown. An ecofeminist perspective posits that current dominant development processes and decisions are shaped by the view that the natural world is at the service of humans (Randriamaro and Hargreaves 2019). This view reduces the natural world to inanimate "things" to be exploited for human consumption and profit.

Ecofeminism, while encompassing a diversity of approaches, is an organising and rallying point against ecological injustice. For African eco-feminisms Randriamaro (2024, p. 184) states that it goes further:

> (African ecofeminists) are committed to the deconstruction of relations of domination at the intersection of gender, class, ethnic origin, and 'races', including colonialism, North/South hierarchies, etc., with the aim of overcoming all kinds of oppression against women and Nature.

The understanding is that humans are not separate from, or more important than, the natural world. There is an understanding of the deep entanglement of colonialism and capitalism with environmental destruction. Central to ecofeminism is praxis. The theory is forged in the struggles to challenge the brutality of patriarchal capitalism and to form future alternative ecofeminist visions (Salleh 2017). The feminism of ecofeminism is about collective empowerment, rather than individual advancement within liberal feminism. Ecofeminism is about solidarity, standing

together, and fighting against domination in all forms. As Ariel Salleh (email message to co-author, 10 August 2021) asserts, 'ecofeminism and popular education are made for each other'.

Chiponda (2021) draws on Wangari Maathai, a leading African ecofeminist, to highlight the close links between African feminism and African ecological struggles, which question both the patriarchal and neo-colonial structures that undermine the continent. Climate change and colonialism are inextricably linked. Addressing the effects of climate change cannot be achieved without also addressing the legacies of colonialism. Therefore, considering the impact of historic and ongoing colonialist practices is essential in tackling climate change (Zografos and Robbins 2020).

There are many resonances and some differences between feminist popular education and ecofeminist popular education. While both are critical of Enlightenment notions of mind-body separation and instrumental and rational cognition, as the privileged mode of knowledge production, feminist popular education has tended to be anthropocentric, not including more-than-human life in their practices and analysis. Von Kotze and Walters (2023) argue that radical popular education must be ecofeminist, moving from the 'separation paradigm' which carries with it techno-industrial values of Western Eurocentric culture, towards the 'relationality paradigm' which is a relational understanding of reality and existence. A relational way of seeing perceives reality as an organic web of relations where all things are connected within a living system (Lange 2023).

With the violent undermining of local knowledge through colonialism as graphically described by Ghosh (2021), ecofeminists foreground cognitive justice (Burt 2020). They argue for the centrality of the knowledge and understanding of people who are 'on the front lines' of ecological destruction. In pursuit of cognitive justice, popular educators highlight the importance of epistemology and methodology through embodied, creative, experiential learning – they challenge the dominant knowledge hierarchies. This is an essential dimension of ecofeminist popular education.

Pan-Africanism

Working across various African countries, WoMin more recently emphasises the importance of Pan-Africanism which aims to unify Africans on the continent and in the diaspora, all bound by common history and destiny, to resist artificial borders and divisions, along with enduring colonial relations of unequal exchange and dependency with the West. It has its origins in the struggles of all African peoples against five centuries of enslavement, colonisation, and imperialism. As Coumba Toure, former coordinator of Africans Rising, says, "We really work to build solidarity among Africans on the continent and in the diaspora on all kinds of issues, to make sure that they live with dignity, that their humanity is recognised, and that people care for each other" (Benson 2020, p. 114). More generally, the Pan-African movement aims to "promote the political, socio-economic and cultural unity, emancipation and self-reliance of Africa and its diaspora" (Adebajo 2020, p. 4). The relationship between feminism and Pan-Africanism is a critical consideration (Mama and Abbas 2015) and influences the form and shape of Feminist Schools, particularly in relation to women's transnational participation, language usage, and the curriculum.

WoMin is actively engaged in giving meaning to a renewed living, breathing Pan-Africanism constructed by women through collective struggle and solidarity both through the schools and through its different programmes and actions.

In summary, ecofeminist popular education expands feminist popular education by explicitly integrating socio-ecological justice. Pan-African, ecofeminist popular education additionally promotes the political, socio-economic, and cultural unity, emancipation and self-reliance of Africa and its diaspora in its orientation. With this conceptual framing, we proceed to explore the schools' pedagogy.

The case of WoMin's feminist schools

The focus of the case is on exploring the emergent curriculum within Feminist Schools and probing how educators teach complex theoretical ideas while simultaneously honouring women's embodied knowledge. We begin with the school's history and development.

History and development

The first school was co-organised with members of Just Associates (JASS) in 2016. Since then, a further five Schools have taken place. COVID-19 derailed efforts for 18 months. WoMin's first two schools had participants from various African countries – we referred to these schools as 'Pan-African'. Since then, there have been national schools in response to requests from country partners, as well as 'linguistic' schools. These are multilingual spaces with English or French as the main language, with translation into local languages.

Here is a list of the schools to date:

2016, Johannesburg, South Africa. Just Associates (JASS). Pan African.

2017, Accra, Ghana. NETRIGHT-Ghana. Pan African.

2018, Hoima, Uganda. National Association of Professional Environmentalists (NAPE) and the Kwataniza Women's Group. National.

2021, Harare, Zimbabwe. Centre for National Resource Governance (CNRG). National.

2021, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Organisation pour le Renforcement des Capacités de Développement (ORCADE). Linguistic (Francophone).

2023, Kampala, Uganda. The Southern and Eastern Africa Trade Information and Negotiations Institute (SEATINI-Uganda). Linguistic (Anglophone).

While schools may be convened at specific moments, connected to national or regional struggles, giving it a unique character, each school covers core political principles and ideas grounded in women's lived experiences, struggles, and strategies.

On average there are 40 participants, with three or four facilitators, staying in residence for between four to six days. Participants vary in age, from 18 to 60 years. Many of the participants are peasant farmers who engage in other income-generating activities, like artisanal mining and trading. Participants' travel, accommodation and other costs are fully covered, and in some instances, women

receive a modest 'loss of work' reimbursement to compensate for lost income during school attendance. The rule of thumb is at least eighty per cent of participants are community-based, with less than twenty per cent from NGOs and solidarity organisations. This ensures that the programme is shaped by women most affected by extractivism who are on the frontlines of resistance. Most participants have limited formal schooling.

WoMin works in solidarity with and in support of, an extensive network of partner organisations and communities of women across Africa. It is through these relations that participants are identified and invited to the schools, and the geographical location for each school is agreed. WoMin's in-country partners are actively involved in co-organising and shaping each school.

Curricula and methodologies

The first school was shaped with JASS, drawing on their approach, thematics, tools and methods tried and tested in their own feminist schools. The experience of working alongside JASS facilitators was powerful and instructive, and formative in shaping future schools. Since then, drawing from deep emerging insights with women resisting extractivism, we evolved our approach to embrace explicit ecological, anti-capitalist, feminist and Pan-African orientations. Our approach establishes inseparable connections between extractivist colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy, and ecological breakdown, with marginalised women placed centrally. It affirms life-centred alternatives with inextricable links between humans and more-than-human life. It aims to support deepening movements and actions to change current realities and imagine and advance alternatives to patriarchal capitalism.

What does this mean in practice? As an illustration, we reference a thumbnail sketch of the Zimbabwe School's (WoMin & CNRG, 2021) curriculum.

Zimbabwe Feminist School, 2021

The overall objectives:

1. Women will have an awareness of themselves living within a patriarchal, capitalist society and a sense of themselves living in a world of unequal power, structures, and systems.
2. Women will understand what it means to build collective power. Their own responses and organising, movement responses and resistance, are to be undertaken in ways that keep women and their communities safe.

The programme is divided into themes:

Day 1: Understanding ourselves, understanding the world – the personal is political

This includes 'body mapping': Understanding what impact mining and other industries have on you and other women in your community? Understand HOW and WHY mining and other activities affect women in particular ways. Use body mapping exercises to visualise and explain to others.

Locating ourselves in nature: Understanding relationships to nature or the environment, particularly women's relationships. How is that relationship affected by mining? Where do we place our "bodies" in the context of nature and the

environment? Methods include drawing nature from where participants come, placing body maps in the context of the environment/nature.

Day 2: A Case Study

Participants read together a case study of an extractivist project and the resistance to it and have a series of discussions where they collectively analyse the case, identify the key actors, strategies, and issues at play through small group exercises and plenary discussions.

Day 3: Talking about Power

Building Our Power and Deepening Our Resistance: In plenary, we go back to the case study and discuss how communities resisted and their successes – victories, failures, lessons, changes over time? (This includes issues of state power; how it is strengthened through relationships with other state actors, their financing, and corporations; geopolitics and impacts on African development agendas).

In groups, we discuss our own struggles, focusing explicitly on women organising, our roles, challenges, centrality of women. We then move to a plenary sharing. We also host a film screening, *Women Hold up the Sky* (WoMin producer, 2021). Thereafter a facilitated discussion; link the case study to personal experiences.

Day 4 – Exploring our YES/alternatives.

The question that guides our discussion of alternatives is: What is the world we are fighting for – for women, community, environment? We then reflect on time spent together, experiences in communities, and through drawings, begin to imagine the world we want to see; appreciate how important imagination is as forms of resistance.

As the illustrative programme shows, we have core building blocks. These are articulated in, *WoMin Alliance Feminist Schools Conceptual Thinking* (WoMin, n.d.). They include:

Understanding: power; capitalism and the extractivist economy – with militarism, securitisation and violence against women embedded within; links between the exploitation of women and nature – making ecofeminism real; feminist movement building; political economy particularly for women and communities; relationships amongst extractivist capitalism, patriarchy, biodiversity, and climate crises.

Exploring: ideas around ecosystems, various women's relationships to land, food, water, etc.; the violence of patriarchy and capitalism and building an understanding of and process for well-being, safety, and security; African Ecofeminist development alternatives; building from women's lived experiences and creating space for radical sharing and voice; Pan-Africanism (this was added more recently).

To engage these themes, different methodologies are used connecting theory through participants' lived experiences, where their entangled relationships to the natural environment are made visible. Examples include: 'body mapping' exercises where through body scans, women identify and contemplate the impacts of the extractive industries on their bodies – heads, hands, feet, heart, lungs, uterus…. This offers a powerful entrée to mapping the scars of extractivism upon natural territories and then exploring the relationship between body and territory. Another is 'travel maps' where participants describe travelling from home to the school – whose permission was needed? Who would take care of the home? What were safety concerns, and so on? Gradually, through storytelling (sometimes by drawing or

painting), links amongst imperialism, extractivist capitalism, patriarchy, environmental destruction, intergenerational impacts, gender, and rising threats to social reproduction, are created. Another participatory tool is a 'timeline' which is used, for example, to explore different 'phases of development' in ways that connect local experiences to dominant trends across the continent.

In addition to embodied, often playful experiential processes, we access films and other media (Mapondera 2023). The WoMin film *Women Hold up the Sky* is generative – as stated in the report (WoMin & CNRG, 2021), "Zimbabwean women were able to learn and see in action the power of women working together to challenge mining corporations". WoMin's animated films, for example, the history of Africa's exploitation, are useful catalysts for discussion that help override language barriers.

What methodologies have left us uneasy?

In the Ghana school (WoMin 2017), there was a reader of articles addressing key political themes. The challenge was the varying levels of language and literacy in English and French. One example was an academic text on social reproduction and the agrarian question – it was inaccessible. Facilitators worked around the problem by creating reading groups to explore complex ideas such as social reproduction, linking into personal lived experiences. Some found the reading valuable as they connected their experiences and knowledge to wider contexts. One participant said, "[I found the readings on security] very inspiring… I am a slow reader but enjoyed the discussion. [It] was so lively".

Since then, we have used readings with circumspection. We now largely theorise concepts from women's stories and experiences. For example, during the Francophone School a participant spoke about being excluded from education because she was a girl – this led to deep discussion on patriarchy.

The second point of unease has been the delivery of 'inputs' by external subject specialists. In both the South African and Ghana schools, the 'pitching' of their contributions was too complex, and concepts did not relate to participants' experiences and ideas. We have since limited these and explored complex ideas experientially.

Impact?

We have not yet had formal impact assessments of the schools. However, we can glean a partial sense of impact from the WoMin five-year strategy evaluation undertaken in 2019 (Meer 2019). Interviews conducted for the evaluation revealed, for example, that activists from the Niger Delta who attended the South African and Ghana schools had been inspired to organise women in their villages. Evelyn, an environmental activist from the Niger Delta, with no prior exposure to feminist ideas, became committed to working with women afterwards: 'Feminist training changed my life personally and as an activist.' Many participants come with organising experience and concerns, and they deepen their analysis and strategic options for their local contexts.

The impact is, of course, both on participants and facilitators – as Freire (1972, p. 45) urged, "both are simultaneously teachers *and* students". As facilitators, we

have deepened our understanding of women's central role in social reproduction, amongst much else. We understand more about the systemic violence of the extractivist economy and how to create space for well-being and collective care. Overall, the schools have challenged us to rethink how to build collective theories, drawing from her stories 'on our feet', as a basis for profound learning, critical analysis, and solidarity-building.

With the history and development of the schools as background, we home in on the emergent curriculum and pedagogical dance between teaching abstract theoretical ideas and honouring women's lived experiences.

Tracing themes and implications

The curriculum covers vast terrain which cannot be covered in much depth in four or five days. Because of the curriculum breadth, it's useful to understand elements of the curriculum as 'GPS coordinates' which provide broad orientation, rather than being a pre-packaged programme. What is prioritised is shaped by contemporary issues in the local place and by participants. As illustrative, in the 2023 Anglophone School, the programme centred around a case study of the Kaweri community in Uganda, which had been evicted from their land for a German-owned coffee plantation. Women from the Kaweri community were participants in the school, and they shared stories of resistance to violent treatment by the government and company. This session gave powerful insights into the impacts of extractive developments, allowed women to draw clear parallels across contexts, and catalysed discussions of 'big concepts' such as patriarchy, feminism, colonialism, and the ecological crisis.

The 'ideal typè ecofeminist popular education framework developed by Walters and von Kotze (2021) is a useful reference point to reflect on the curriculum coordinates. They posit that the curriculum is shaped and integrated in contextually relevant ways – working with working-class urban women will no doubt be different from working with peasant women. The curriculum includes addressing mutually beneficial relations between humans and more-than-human life; deconstructing the idea of Woman = Nature; exploring inextricable links amongst more-than-human life, patriarchy, and capitalism; analysing and illuminating interrelated systems; imagining alternative futures beyond patriarchal capitalism; planning action and prefiguring and rehearsing social relations of solidarity. They suggest that the elements that need to be interrogated through praxis in an ecofeminist curriculum are those that relate to participants' lives in immediate ways, like food security and water – these are entry points for deepening analyses of exploitation and oppression.

At a cursory level, there appears to be a strong resonance between the schools' curriculum coordinates and the 'ideal type' curriculum. In the school's curriculum framework, extractivist capitalism and feminist movement building, are identified specifically as these relate to the mission of WoMin's feminist schools.

While the ecofeminist curriculum forms a large container, within this container we argue that it can also be described as 'emergent'. Lange *et al.* (2021, p. 42) offer a useful explanation of 'emergent curriculum':

> Curriculum is from the Latin word currere, which is a verb meaning "a process of seeking in conversation" and of transformation, not pre-pack-aged information. Thus, curriculum is emergent within continuous exploring among educators, learners, texts and the natural world. Emergent curriculum allows student and educator to build connections, encourage wildest dreams, create enticing propositions, and foster transformative outcomes.

Phrased differently, an emergent curriculum is a pedagogical approach that adapts to the unique needs and interests of the learners, rather than adhering to a strict, pre-determined syllabus. This description would fit many popular education programmes which have broad political purposes and are by design responsive to the needs and contexts within which they take place. The curriculum in the schools does emerge in non-linear responsive ways and is about epistemology and methodology. For example, the theme of corruption comes up regularly from participants. When this emerged in the Francophone school, we designed a session that covered different scales and forms of corruption linked to extractives; evidence addressing vast illicit financial flows out of Africa by transnational corporations; and contemplated racist assumptions in the 'Africans are corrupt' discourse.

From this broad sketch of the curriculum, we acknowledge a tension between an ecofeminist curriculum that is shaped by key interrelated concepts amongst capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism, racism, and ecological breakdown, and a responsive, flexible, emergent curriculum that is shaped by the needs and interests of the participants within very particular local/global contexts. This leads us towards the exploration of the more specific question about facilitating engagement with these abstract theoretical ideas while honouring women's lived experiences. We do this by using four themes: whose knowledge counts; labelling; language; and praxis.

Whose knowledge counts?

As noted earlier, ecofeminism disrupts key aspects of the dominant Western knowledge system and prioritises cognitive justice. In the ecofeminist curriculum framework suggested by Walters and von Kotze (2021), key issues to be addressed are: 'the hegemonic view of Nature as a 'thing', rather than as a complex interrelated ecosystem'; and establishing 'mutually beneficial relations between humans and more-than-human life'. Lange (2023) agrees that the move to unlearn the 'separation paradigm' of patriarchal capitalism and to (re)learn a relational approach which is part of Indigenous knowledge systems, is urgent.

Within the schools, different worldviews are engaged. Most women know they are deeply interconnected with water, land, forests, etc. For example, in the Zimbabwe School (WoMin 2021), when participants were asked how they understand the relationship between women and nature, typical responses were:

> Women and nature are the same in that we [both] have no say in crucial important matters hence nothing or no activity happens without women or nature from food to cleaning…. we are both used and discarded. (2021, p. 5)

> They endure a lot of pain since all the burden is on women. Once nature is disturbed you have disturbed or destroyed a woman's future. (2021, p. 6)

Samantha reinforces this point:

> In the schools, women participants have never been confused about nature and the importance of all of nature to their well-being, livelihoods, and existence. The concept of nature is not one imposed by us, as facilitators, but instead raised by women who every day are in deep relationship to plant, forest, aquatic and animal species as they go about the daily work of reproducing themselves, their families and communities whilst simultaneously safeguarding sustainability of all species. We consider African peasant women to be the most profound ecofeminists; it is we who learn from them and not the other way around. (WoMin Report 2023)

Many educators, like us, have been brought up, to some degree, within the Western world view of hierarchical dualisms which are damaging to humans and all more-than-human species. Unpicking the false assumptions that prop up the unsustainable and abusive relationship with social and ecological systems is a pressing task for educators. Most participants have more holistic, interconnected, and relational approaches to life and livelihoods. By way of example, the women of Sakatia (WoMin 2021, p. 16) in Madagascar explain that,

> It is forbidden to destroy the environment because forests provide rain and fresh air, we need for living…That's why Sakatia is a green island because we don't cut down forests over the hills, and we also plant trees. [When it comes to fishing or harvesting food] … You pick only the quantity you need; any surplus must be distributed to the community; it cannot be thrown away or sold (WoMin 2021).

The popular education process can invert the relationship between 'educator' and participants. If 'educators' are committed to deconstructing traditional hierarchies, then we need to forge ethical and decolonising relations of solidarity. It is rural peasant women in the schools and other popular education spaces, who can and do teach us to unlearn the 'separation paradigm' that Western industrialised capitalism has taught. The women turn the tables on 'who knows' and challenge the dominant knowledge hierarchy. The participants become the teachers, exposing powerful ideas, beliefs and practices. We acknowledge that this is a complex and important matter which requires deeper investigation and thinking in our efforts ahead.

There are various strategies and approaches to unlearn separation. While the details are beyond the scope of this paper, illustrative examples can be found in Special Issue – Climate Justice | PIMA Network. Lange provides a cautionary note, which emphasises that there is no shortcut:

> The way forward is not appropriating the myths of non-Western and Traditional cultures, but to let them resonate and lead us into resuscitating or recreating myths deep within our own ancestries, appropriate to the land where we find ourselves as well as the lands we came from. (Lange 2023, p. 364)

Lange argues that everyone has experienced non-separation deep in our past, and one way of relearning it is to retrace our own historical path back to that point.

Mbau (2023, par 6) similarly appreciates non-binary understandings and personal history:

> Having Western education doesn't stop me from being curious about my past and the desire to know what my ancestors talked about around a fire, and I'm grateful that

> my grandmother is my gateway to this all: the opportunity to integrate the two realities.

While Mbau strongly affirms Indigenous knowledge in relation to the environment, as a climate scientist, she argues that this is not enough – climate change science is essential to survival in times of ecological disaster. This is true as is traditional knowledge, where for example, a particular call of a bird would inform people that heavy rains and storms were approaching, thus giving people time to prepare. Relationships amongst different knowledges are complex – they are not held in tight containers but flow into one another.

Skosana and Cock (2023, p. 13) concur with Mbau, in acknowledging the importance of scientific knowledge at different moments, when they observe:

> In several community workshops, 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.

While this may well be the case in this instance, it is also true that farmers, for example, can trace the changing climate over decades and are the loudest whistle-blowers. They may not be able to explain why the climate is changing, but this is where popular educators facilitate building theories with those in the room.

To summarise, within ecofeminist popular education, cognitive justice is central, and epistemological authority may shift at different times when learners become teachers and vice versa. We used the illustrative example of different understandings of humans' relationships to the natural world. This demonstrates the contingency of whose knowledge counts, when and where, within popular educational spaces.

Labelling

The reality of many of the schools' participants is that they are doing important ecofeminist work, while not necessarily identifying as 'ecofeminists'. This observation is confirmed in the research about black working-class women in mining-affected areas by Skosana and Cock (2023). They quote Makoma Lekalakala who warns against imposing ideological labels such as 'feminist' or 'activist' on people as this may undermine solidarity. As Lekalakala says, labels can be exclusionary when an ideological consensus is not necessary in working for environmental justice.

Winnet expresses WoMin's approach:

> Our approach is ordinarily not to use abstract concepts or terms which women cannot immediately connect to their knowledge and lived realities. The actual words may be introduced once the essence of such words have been explored and illustrated through the concrete experiences of participants. We look for equivalent concepts or words in local languages. An example from a recent meeting was discussion on 'Ubuntù and 'communal land systems'. Without exception, participants from across the continent found equivalent words in local and indigenous languages. The same cannot be said for languages with western Eurocentric frames of reference, where similar concepts have been eclipsed by the rise of capitalism, with accompanying processes of financialisation and privatisation.

One of the paradoxes is that the schools are named 'feminist' but in the schools, the word 'feminist' or 'feminism' is used sparingly. On the one hand, the Feminist Schools are located within broader, global movements of feminists and ecofeminists, and on the other, many of the grassroots women who live ecofeminism in their everyday lives, don't identify overtly as such. WoMin exercises care in the use of language to take the lead from partners and allies who work daily in local and national contexts, understanding the nuances of language and constraints of cultural and social ideas and beliefs. Depending on the context, we may use other terms, for example, sisters, sisterhood, community of women, or women's solidarity, conscious that words may involve risk and harm. (WoMin Report 2023)

In general, like Benya and Yeni (2022), the use of the term 'feminist schools' references the politics, conceptual framing, and methodology at work. Labelling has much to do with the broader theme of 'language' to which we now turn.

Language

The words we use to interpret and make sense of the world colour the way we see it rather than being an 'objective' tool for description. The language used is imbued with power and the knowledge framework or system it draws on is equally representative of specific power relations. Benya and Yeni (2022) make a case for the development and refinement of indigenous feminist theories/concepts that are locally grounded but outward looking, drawing from and in conversation with local languages, realities, and activists. This is intricate and important work.

Within the schools, colonial languages, English, or French, are usually used with discomfort, given that participants speak many different local languages, and it can reinforce uneven power relations. Participants are encouraged to use local languages. To facilitate this, interpreters are used. If necessary, women who have come in groups as a community will support one another to ensure every voice is heard.

A summative comment in the evaluation of the 2018 Uganda School conveys the complexities:

> There were a couple of moments where I was concerned, we were losing some people's inputs due to language barriers and people feeling that they should communicate in English even though they did not have to. Perhaps we just need to reiterate daily that people must express themselves in the language that is from their heart, and that part of being a feminist space is resisting the dominance of colonial languages anyway. We could also see about having sessions facilitated in local language where it's possible instead of always English facilitation. (WoMin 2018)

Winnet (WoMin Report 2023) reminds us that language is important as part of enacting Pan-Africanism. Bridging the colonial linguistic legacies is an ongoing process.

Praxis

The creation of safe, co-learning spaces is a foundation of feminist popular education. We understand that social encounters are co-constructed, that people are

interconnected and interdependent, and learning is intersubjective. Theory and practice are intertwined starting with the co-creation of rules within the school, ensuring women's stories are central. The curriculum is an embodied practice. Examples of this include the ways we integrate Pan-Africanism, trauma, and violence.

Pan-Africanist orientations are imbued, starting with personal stories of family members and the ways lives are impacted by colonisation, liberation struggles, post-liberation and neo-colonialism. As Samantha describes:

> We are on track to build Pan-African consciousness. Trying to break down women's identification with countries, developing the idea of one Africa… we construct the history and narrative that is different in understanding the colonial state – really exploring the corruption, the power that corporations and Western governments wield over African governments. So, the analysis we co-construct is profoundly Pan-African and affirming of our continent. (WoMin Report 2023)

The safe co-learning space must also respond to women's embodied trauma and violence. As we pointed out above, extreme violence towards ecology and people is endemic to the extractive industries. Recognising how women's lives are riven with manifold forms of violence, we support women variously through the provision of therapeutic practices like massage, to having counsellors – women access these resources when and if they feel comfortable to do so.

Our approach includes the understanding of systemic violence and trauma and the provision of support for individual women. We recognise this is a complex, multidimensional matter. Women have their own ways of coping which vary across cultural and geographical groups. In some areas, women find it easier to open up about their difficulties while in others it's taboo. What we have learnt is that interventions are more successful if they are well planned with the counsellor, and we monitor and debrief regularly and adapt accordingly.

The safe co-learning environment creates a container for compassionate collective responses to trauma – for example, in the Francophone School in 2021, a participant from Guinea Conakry reported her house had been destroyed through mine-blasting. The group came together making a collection to help her on her return. This was solidarity in action.

The facilitation of experiential processes requires both art and heart. It takes deft and compassionate group processing skills. It also requires facilitators to have sophisticated political understanding to weave deeper Pan-African, ecofeminist analysis, through the stories as they emerge. This happens 'in the moment', on our feet. As stated in the Ghana evaluation report (WoMin 2017):

> The resource people that worked the best demonstrated a deep continental, grounded knowledge and experience and could give expression to capitalist patriarchy without jargon. They embodied the content.

In summary, the schools' curriculum covers vast terrain, with thematic building blocks to guide the programme. The emphases in each school are shaped by the national or regional context; needs of participants; and socio-economic, political imperatives at the time – in this way, the curriculum is emergent.

Managing the dance between theoretical ideas and women's lived experiences, occurs through storytelling, enacted through participatory, embodied processes, and

use of various media. Facilitators' abilities to elucidate theory through the stories while 'on her feet' take art and heart. The politics of knowledge and language are central questions – facilitators and participants are both teachers/learners at different moments; and 'conceptual vocabularies' (Benya and Yeni 2022) require further development for use in schools and beyond.

Not so much an end as a beginning

Women in communities affected by extractive projects attend the schools. They are doing important ecofeminist work in their practices rather than their identities. We agree with Skosana and Cock (2023, p. 3) who point out, that many women in these communities express ecofeminism in four respects: their role in social reproduction where there is frequently an ethic of sharing and mutual support; the spirit of solidarity which focuses on collective rather than individualised needs; respect for the natural world; their role in taking responsibility and caring for the sick in their homes, hospitals, and communities.

The schools reinforce and build on these orientations towards strengthening movements of women with Pan-African consciousness. We have described the curriculum within the Feminist Schools. We have identified various ways in which pedagogical practices are used to place women's experiences at the centre to elucidate abstract concepts linking to their daily lives. To be able to do this effectively, the capabilities of educators are crucial. They require sophisticated political understandings to weave deeper Pan-African, ecofeminist analysis, through the stories as they emerge. Many feminist popular educators are inducted into their roles through immersion in social movements. Knowing more about their pathways to this work is important, so we can understand more deeply what it takes to produce high-quality ecofeminist popular educators into the future.

Many participants have organising experience and concerns, and they deepen their analysis and strategic options for their local contexts. However, schools are limited by time. There is insufficient time to adequately address, for example, complex notions of 'just transitioning' away from fossil fuels, when lives and livelihoods are so entangled. Imagining just alternative futures to patriarchal-colonial capitalism is essential but this needs time. In response to feedback from past participants for a more sustained platform to deepen their knowledge and organising skills, an eighteen-month Women's Learning Liberation course is underway across six African countries with 60 participants. This is an indicator of the impact of the schools.

This article is an important step to describe and explore an approach to Pan-African ecofeminist popular education within the schools, and so deepen the praxis of ecofeminist popular education more broadly. It outlines how a curriculum develops over several years which includes women's experiential knowledge, Indigenous knowledge and scientific knowledge, to produce new knowledge for the protection of the Earth, women's organising and resistance. It highlights the critically important role of facilitators in building theory from women's stories while 'on her feet'. It also shows how knowledge hierarchies are challenged when participants become the teachers.

There is much unfinished business that, hopefully, we and others can address to support African women's resistance to violent extractivist developments and to deepen the praxis of Pan-African, ecofeminist popular education. We find that ecofeminist perspectives resonate powerfully with the experiences and perspectives of women in peasant and poor urban communities across the African continent, but we wish to dig deeper – for example, in what ways does school participation impact their resistance? How is 'Naturè understood by both facilitators and participants? How do participants take the lessons into broader social and political movements? How can methodologies be adapted and changed for greater impact? Together with others, we will contribute to the development and refinement of indigenous feminist theories/concepts that are locally grounded but outward looking. (Benya and Yeni 2022)

The odds against African women resisting the extractive industries are great. As Margaret Kagole says in the film (WoMin 2021), "We are like squirrels against an elephant, because the elephant is huge and can run over and squash you". The Feminist Schools are a place of refuge, where hopeful bridges of solidarity are built amongst women, across communities and countries to strengthen their collective resistance both personally and politically. The schools disrupt traditional knowledge hierarchies. This case study deepens the argument that experience is a source of knowledge and provides rich evidence to support it.

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