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# Feminist spiritualities, gender equality, and sustainable development: The possibilities of a countermovement<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*Feminist historiography indicates that spirituality has historically been one of the instruments whereby women could “speak”. This “voice” implied recognition and authority, to a certain degree, in a patriarchal-oriented reality. In this regard, feminist spirituality became a vehicle for women to authorise their own religious and spiritual contributions and insights. Feminist spirituality became a countermovement – countering perceptions and ingrained convictions that a woman could not be a mediator between God and humanity. Feminist spirituality contributed to the creation of spaces for women to study and participate in the creation of religious-spiritual texts. Women’s contexts are diverse and intersectional, and so is feminist spirituality, to the extent that it is more appropriate to speak of feminist spiritualities in the plural. This article explores the possibilities of feminist spirituality as countermovement that contributes to the realisation of gender equality, in the way that gender equality finds*

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- 1 This article includes reworked aspects of the PhD study of N. Swanepoel, entitled “Mapping the contribution of feminist spiritualities to the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goal of ‘gender equality’”, completed in the Department of Systematic and Historical Theology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, under the supervision of Tanya van Wyk. The article was co-authored with the supervisor, who wrote the introduction and aspects of the conclusion.

*expression in the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. It is situated within a growing field of work that explores how faith communities' religion and spirituality contribute to their being agents of sustainable development, and within the contextual urgency of the sustainable development agenda.*

## 1. WOMEN'S WELL-BEING, THE RISE OF FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS, AND THE AUTHORITY TO "SPEAK"

Close to the end of 2021, the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security (GIWPS) published its 2021/2022 Index Report about the state of women's well-being, globally. It included data of 170 countries.<sup>2</sup> Since its inception, the index has measured the well-being of women in terms of three categories: inclusion, security, and justice. Inclusion covers the economic, social, and political spheres. Security is measured on the individual, community and societal levels, and justice is measured by studying formal laws and monitoring informal discrimination (GIWPS 2021:1). The aim of the Index is to highlight patterns and progress relating to women's status and empowerment around the world (GIWPS 2021:vi). Trends in the index indicate that the global advance of the progress of women has slowed down and that, globally, disparities have widened (GIWPS 2021). Since the first report of the GIWPS in 2017, only 31 countries have had a notable increase in their index scores. In roughly 90 countries, the index score rose with 5%. In 2021, Norway was the country with the highest index score, and Afghanistan, the lowest (GIWPS 2021:2). South Asia is the worst performing region, with high levels of intimate partner violence, legal discrimination, and low levels of inclusion. Six out of the top ten score improvers are in sub-Saharan Africa, although the numbers of forced displaced women and girls in Nigeria, Somalia, and Sudan remain exceptionally high (GIWPS 2021:1). Another index, the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report of 2022, identified gender gaps in the workforce as an emerging crisis (WEF 2022). This same report indicated that women's political empowerment remains the most challenging gender gap to close. Women's well-being is thus being affected on multiple levels.

When it comes to the South African situation specifically, gender inequality manifests itself predominantly in the country's horrific, gender-based violence statistics and it is not a euphemism to state that gender-based violence in South Africa is a pandemic, as the South-African president at the time, Cyril Ramaphosa, stated in 2020. Due to an intersection of both ethnicity and gender, and intersecting experiences of oppression and marginalisation,

2 The data represents investigations on provincial and state levels to show major disparities within country borders that a national average could conceal (GIWPS 2021:vi).

statistically, women of colour in South Africa are particularly adversely affected by gender equality<sup>3</sup> and related gender-based violence (Vallabh 2022).

In her research, Criado Perez (2019) indicates that one of the main foundations of gender inequality and gender-based violence, simply put, is the way in which knowledge is constructed or data is gathered. This is related to who is included in the gathering of data (whose data is gathered) and from whose perspective knowledge construction and data-gathering take place – that is, who is “seen” and who can “speak”. Women’s struggle to be seen and heard, and the recognition and awareness of their authority to proverbially speak has been the foundation of the modern rise of feminist consciousness. As the notable feminist historiographer Lerner (1993) indicated in her classic work entitled, *The creation of feminist consciousness*, the process of feminist consciousness starts with the recognition of structural oppression that is based on gender. According to Lerner (1993:14, 274), feminist consciousness has five characteristics: women’s awareness that they belong to a subordinate group, and as members of such a group they have suffered resulting injustices; women’s recognition that their “condition” of subordination is not natural, but societally determined; women’s solidarity with each other and the recognition that they should join other women to address the injustices, which is designated as “sisterhood”; women’s own recognition that they can provide their own autonomous definitions of self, their capacities and goals, and women’s development of alternate visions for what it means to be human.

According to Lerner (1993), it is likely that women could have attempted to resist patriarchy in different forms during various epochs, and that the development of feminist consciousness took place in many different stages over periods of hundreds of years. However, this cannot be verified with sources prior to written records of women’s thought that have survived from roughly 600 AD (at least in Western civilisation) (Lerner 1993). Tracing the development of feminist consciousness is a challenging undertaking, due to three aspects that complicate mapping women’s history, namely women’s educational deprivation, women’s sense of self-worth, and the broad range of women’s thoughts and writings that are lost, due to class and race exclusions.

Amidst these obstacles, one of the major ways in which women were authorised and recognised – seen, heard, and able to speak – was through spirituality, and the way in which their growing feminist consciousness connected to that spirituality. This became something that one would currently

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3 Crenshaw, critical race theorist and professor in law, coined the term “intersectionality” in a 1976 employment discrimination case to indicate that a woman’s experience of gender cannot be separated from her race. The theory sets out how multiple layers of oppression reinforce one another (see Bagshaw 2019:25-26; Crenshaw 1989:139-167).

– after the 19<sup>th</sup>-century dawn of the concept of feminism – describe as feminist spirituality. This development had a precursor.

The development of patriarchy was a process that led to women's relationship to the Divine being severed, because men were regarded as the mediators between human beings and God. According to Lerner (1993:vii), in the process of women's educational deprivation and the resulting time-consuming attempts to prove themselves as intellectuals, capable of education, spirituality and specifically mysticism emerged as an alternative mode of thought for women. Mystic spirituality became the vehicle whereby women became "authorised" to speak publicly and establish a new role in public life for themselves, by insisting on their ability to speak to, and be heard by God, something that patriarchy declared to be impossible. For instance, one can mention, for example, Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), the Beguine movement (12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries), Mechtild of Magdeburg (1212-1282), Julian of Norwich (1342-1416), and Hadewijch (1200-1260), to name a few (Hunt 2010; Dreyer 2011; Joubert 2022). Spirituality became a primary arena in which women developed feminist consciousness. Mystical practice paved the way for women to proceed to another aspect of their own redefinition of themselves and their lived realities, because by way of their visions and mystical experiences, they could reclaim the female component of the Divine and, in turn, reconstruct a different religious anthropology.

Waaijman (2002:212-301) suggests that spirituality functions as a countermovement, or more precisely, that one of the main forms of lived spirituality is that of countermovements. Even though spirituality is "latently present" (Waaijman 2002:1) as a quiet force in the background of our daily life, sometimes it forces its way into human consciousness as a presence that cannot be escaped, and that demands change. The origins of Israel are connected to a countermovement arising from the wilderness, namely oppressed farmers, shepherds, stateless people, and prophets who formed countermovements against powerful rulers who would oppress their people (Waaijman 2002:213-214).

Counter-movement denotes a power which offers a counter-play or counterweight against an existing power-configuration. Countermovements in spirituality are found outside the sphere of power structures and established relations: outside of their concepts, their spatial orders, their time period, their hierarchies ... they swim against the current.

Liberation spiritualities and the "uprootedness" of life in exile, on the margins, in the desert are included in his list of what are considered "countermovement" spiritualities. Due to the way in which spirituality has acted as a method

for women to have authorisation to speak and to have their contributions recognised, beyond patriarchal boundaries and obstacles, feminist spiritualities, in the truest sense of the notion, represents a countermovement. In her work, Slee (2002) indicates how feminist spiritual movements are dedicated to celebrating feminist spiritual power in opposition, or in protest to the repossession of that which is female by institutional and patriarchal religion (Slee 2002:loc. 4167). This assumes a type of link between religion and spirituality, albeit not an obvious one. Postmodern spirituality has gone to great lengths to distinguish itself from organised religion, almost resulting in a total schism. Gottlieb (2013:80-93) indicates that there are many overarching characteristics between religion and spirituality. The postmodern insistence that one is spiritual, but not religious, is not *per se* a revolt against these overlapping characteristics, but rather a protest against the way in which religion sometimes features dogmatism (ideological doctrine – authors' designation) in a pronounced way. Schneiders (2003:176-177) also suggests that religion is the optimal context for spirituality and, therefore, makes a case for a partnership between the two.

This article explores the potential of feminist spirituality as a countermovement, in specific reference to the way in which spirituality functioned as a historical method for women to be seen (recognised) and heard (authority to speak). Both these aspects, as indicated earlier, are at the very heart of the obstacles to achieving gender equality – which has become a movement in and of itself, specifically as the UN has included gender equality as a goal of sustainable development in its 17-goal sustainable development programme.

Both the authors are situated in a context – South Africa – that is predominantly religious and where both religion and spirituality function as ways of understanding daily life and the whole of reality. In this context, about 90% of the population designate themselves as religious, with roughly 85% indicating themselves as “Christian” (see Schoeman 2013:4-5). The South African government is cognisant of the religiosity of its citizens, as religious communities are approached in matters of law, for example when the single marriage statute was drafted in 2021. When one uses Uber as transportation on a Sunday, it is nothing strange to listen to Christian preaching or a Sunday radio service, while travelling to your destination.

In such a context, spirituality, as religion's partner and as a countermovement, could have the potential to mobilise the vast numbers of religious communities to look inward, reclaim their identity of being countermovements, and work toward achieving gender equality. Religion's tendency to be both perpetrator and liberator relating to women is applicable, in this instance, and, of course, complex. Spirituality as a countermovement and

feminist spirituality, in particular, might still have some potential to bring about some change regarding women's invisibility and the resulting oppression and violence.

## 2. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF FEMINIST SPIRITUALITIES

The spirituality whereby women were authorised to "speak" took on different forms and thus it is more accurate to refer to feminist spiritualities in the plural. It is also more appropriate to refer to feminist spiritualities in the plural, due to the phenomenon of intersectionality and the recognition of the influence of intersecting identity markers that connect and differentiate different types of feminist spiritualities. For the purpose of this article, "feminist spiritualities" can be described as having central elements of feminist consciousness (Carr 1982:99).

In her contribution, entitled "The Holy Spirit and spirituality", in the *Cambridge companion to feminist theology*, Slee (2002) identifies certain core characteristics of feminist spiritualities that speak to the heart of the matter raised in this article. Waaijman (2002) identifies feminist spiritualities by using similar characteristics. All of these characteristics are embedded in the lived experiences of women. The characteristics can be grouped together in five trends, with the sixth trend being the importance of lived experience.

### 2.1 Feminist spiritualities value bodies, emotions, and aspirations

Feminist spiritualities value bodies, desires, a person's passion, and aspirations. This is viewed as the work of the Spirit that inspires a person or group; the work of the Spirit is regarded as giving life and energy. Feminist spiritualities take faith and bodies, emotions, experiences, and aspirations seriously. The emphasis on this world shows how the Spirit reconceptualises and inspires faith. This characteristic emphasises the strong connection between the personal and the political, which is paramount to the feminist movement (Slee 2002:loc. 4202). Many contemporary understandings capture the dynamic, transformative quality of spirituality as lived experience linked to bodies, nature, and our relationships with others and society (King 2011:21). Spirituality evolved vertically in the West; movement upward towards the divine and away from humanity was perceived as good, with the result that the focus on bodies was not good. Transcendence was embraced and this included the physical body. Dualistic thinking was also rooted in the theology of original sin rather than original blessing. There is a strong contradiction between spirit and matter (Martin 1993:107). These attitudes had a negative

impact on women, as women were constantly identified with their capacity to give birth, with nature, earth and matter and was used to limit female participation and representation in religious institutions (Martin 1993:108).<sup>4</sup> While researching the female biblical narratives, Exum (2016) noticed that women at the border of the patriarchal social order were often referred to as seductive and the dangerous other.<sup>5</sup> Women are most often being blamed for the violence of which they are a victim (Exum 2016:154-155).<sup>6</sup> In the late medieval period, women's spirituality was moved to the edges of religious orders. There were unique patterns of prayer and mysticism. A good example is the Beguine movement.<sup>7</sup> Men placed their authority in the institutional; women placed authority in the supernatural (Lerner 1993:211-213).

Throughout history, the relationship with this world, perceived as horizontal, and the otherworldly, perceived as moving vertically, has evolved and changed. A limited and limiting view was imposed on women, placing women in a double bind. The double bind insists that women have a role given by God, as is noted in biology. This role is linked with a women's biological nature. On the other hand, traditional theology is not able to value these biological and natural processes (Martin 1993:108). The double bind functions in many ways. Women are praised when they are "good", when they have not yet affirmed their authentic selves. They are deemed bad wife and mother, when they develop their authentic selves (Dreyer 1999:373).

Feminist spiritualities give a voice and celebrate bodies. Experiences viewed as inferior such as childbirth are celebrated (Waaaijman 2002:218-219). Through the development of feminist consciousness, the female body and its abilities to create and sustain life gave women leverage to argue for equality. This can be observed in issues that are central to feminists and in issues that are central in feminist spiritualities. Passion, desire, and beauty in all forms are celebrated. Feminist theologies work with "embodied thinking", the human experience and knowledge are rooted in the body. The context is taken

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4 The dictionary of feminist theologies describes "body" as the "physical, material dimension of human existence" (Ross 1996:32). Dualistic thinking resulted in that the body was viewed as inferior and bad.

5 Moyo (2004:74) writes from an African liberation theological perspective and notes how patriarchal metaphors for God resulted in women's bodies still being viewed as a source of evil.

6 Several church fathers' link being female with being sexual. Sexuality is linked with the physical body and that body is then linked with nature (Sjørup 1998:61).

7 The Beguines were groups of women (which actually also constituted a movement) who lived in self-sufficient communities in parts of Europe from the 12<sup>th</sup> century to roughly the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. Women came to these communities which were regarded as spaces for learning, and independent thought. As King (2001) indicates, these women followed a spiritual vocation of their own choosing and formed a community without religious rule. They settled in Beguinages.

seriously and movement towards practical results is essential. An “embodied morality” means to take emotions seriously. Bodily integrity is crucial, as this enables women to have control over their own bodies (Ross 1996:32).

## 2.2 Feminist spiritualities live relationally, connected, and in community

There is a strong emphasis on relationality, connectedness, and community.<sup>8</sup> These elements enable us to perceive the deeper workings of the Spirit and forge deeper bonds. Spirituality is the relational component of lived experience. Spirituality is also the connectedness between the self and the other, the creation and that which is sacred. This characteristic explores the interdependence and mutuality in feminist spiritualities. The importance of community cannot be stressed enough. This community that is found in relationality leads to wholeness, fullness, and the flourishing of all life. Relationality also stresses inclusivity as opposed to dualism (Slee 2002:loc. 4212). Feminist theologians emphasise what all human beings have in common; mutuality and solidarity among all human beings is what they value (Baker-Fletcher 1996:69). Diversity is valued and is regarded as a marker present in Christian feminist communities. Christian community culminates in the spiritual embrace that meets the commitment to fight for justice for all (Purvis 1996:51).

Relationality and reciprocity are central components of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity that emphasises plurality, relation, and unity in diversity enables one to move beyond binaries. In these, there is difference without hierarchy. The persons are who they are in relation (Soskice 2002). In the Trinity, there is much relational activity such as creating, renewing, and redeeming. This activity shows that God is never static, but relational and dynamic. In traditional theology, the Trinity is usually at least two male figures, God and Jesus. This can be problematic in feminist theology. Trinitarian theology focuses on relationality and the pattern of relationship (Johnson 1992:192-194). The Trinity is at the heart of feminist theological thinking and understanding. It is the centre from where thoughts are formed. Feminist ethical thinking is always connected to the realities of the lives of women (Grey 2001:15).

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8 Lonsdale (2005:252) means that everything about Christian spirituality is Trinitarian. Christian spirituality guides a person to reflect on his/her relationship with his/her creator who is transforming the world by sending the Word and the Spirit.



McIntosh (2005:177) explores Trinitarian perspectives on Christian spirituality.<sup>9</sup> When studying experiences where the Trinitarian God is involved, there seems to be a reversal of order and abundance. This abundance or generosity is rooted in Jesus Christ, in relation with the Trinity. When studying the Trinity, one is constantly reminded of the mystery that includes the sharing of life in the Trinity *perichoreses*. This sharing of life between the Trinity in an intimate way is what can also be called “spirituality”. Relationality, as originating in the Trinity, forms the basis for the relationship between God and human beings. God is relational, life affirming and present (Grey 2001:55). God acts through our passion for just relation (Grey 2001:56). The definite connection to vulnerability needs to be taken seriously. The world reacts to everyone, and it depends a great deal on who you are and where you are positioned. We are not all equally vulnerable (Scheman 2012:473).

### 2.3 Feminist spiritualities focus on the right relation in all relationships

In feminist spiritualities, there is a search for the right relation in communities as well as interpersonal relations. This is connected to judgement and justice,<sup>10</sup> and takes on different forms in different settings and cultures. The commitment to judgement and justice is observed in politics as well as the re-evaluation of structures. It also includes social structures (Slee 2002:loc. 4240). Feminist spiritualities understand that there is a fundamental connection between the spiritual growth of the individual and the quest for social justice (Waaijman 2002:218-219).

People are “agents-in-relation”. People are related to both their internal and external contexts. Spirituality is the means whereby people can engage in their relationships. Spirituality is the way through which self-transcendence takes place and where the internal and external spheres of existence meet. The ultimate spiritual issues such as issues of injustice become issues of active human existence (O’Gorman 2001:352-357). Spirituality is, therefore, not confined to interpersonal relations; it is broad and extends to a larger web of social structures (Slee 2002:loc. 4243). Feminist consciousness and the recovery of traditions that were hidden and even lost evoke mixed reactions from both women and men. The recovery or discovery can bring

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9 McIntosh (2005:180) discerns three features, namely self-transcendence, love for others, and freedom of agency, that are present together in spirituality and that give life to one another. Trinitarian belief is a belief in God that invites us to join in the mystery, to journey with the Trinity.

10 Power and oppression are crucial elements of justice for feminists. Justice is “power-in-relation”. Feminist theologians view liberation and justice as connected elements. Justice and to care are also connected. Narratives are often used to become aware of injustices. This is an element often present in feminist theologies (Lebacqz 1996:159).

joy and empowerment. The other reaction is the reality of suppression and the realisations of deep marginalisation that creates pain and a sense of alienation. One of the many ingredients that make up an integral spirituality is the struggle for justice and peace in the world (King 2011:29). A theology of mutual relation reshapes the model of God and God in relation to us. God is not perceived as separate or outside of this world, not in relation with us.

Rather, God is the ground or matrix of mutual relation. there can be no split between loving God and loving ourselves or between loving God and loving our neighbour (Ruether 1998:227).

Spiritual practices are part of a person's or group's everyday lives, and it asks the question as to how spirituality relates to ethical behaviours or a life of transformation (Sheldrake 2014:60). Spirituality is directly concerned with how a person or group lives their lives in different ways and in different contexts (Sheldrake 2014:60). This aspect forms part of the lived experience of individuals and the transformation possibilities that lie within feminist spiritualities. The experience of living undergirds all the characteristics and cannot be separated from it. One common factor in all human lives is the experience of being human.

## 2.4 Feminist spiritualities are focused on liberating the earth

The fourth characteristic is the importance of the liberation of the earth, as women show how neglect of the earth and of women goes hand in hand. Liberation of women automatically includes liberation of the earth. A feminist spirituality is strongly committed to a new relation to the earth (Slee 2002:loc. 4243). There is an intrinsic connection between men's possession of women and violence that is inflicted on the environment (Waaajman 2002:218-219). When an interrelated understanding of reality is embraced, as is noted in feminist spiritualities, environmental problems are understood as societal problems (Halke 1996:139-140).

Multiplicity, diversity, and interdependence<sup>11</sup> are crucial for the spirituality of feminists. Interdependence has several components and is viewed and understood differently between feminists. Ecofeminism is an important expression of this characteristic of feminist spiritualities. Ecofeminism is built on ecology and feminism (Gebara 1996:76; see Van Wyk 2022:1-7). There are many works available on ecofeminism. Ecofeminism recognises and strongly condemns a society where the subtle domination of women is still present (Gebara 1996:77).

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11 Interdependence is crucial as it embraces community, enabling power imbalances to be challenged. Interdependence is a "communal way of life" (Kim-Cragg 2018:33).

## 2.5 Feminist spiritualities focus on inclusivity, a holistic view, and integration

The fifth trend is intricately connected to the justice and life orientation of feminist spiritualities, with the emphasis on holism, integration, and inclusivity. The Spirit is at work in the world to push human efforts towards truth and justice (Slee 2002:loc. 4250; Waaijman 2002:218-219). Rituals are important in a holistic and interrelated world view (Clark 1996:251). When the world is lived and perceived in a connected way, it becomes part of the social fibre and construction of reality<sup>12</sup> and affects the maintenance of societal structures (Zaponne 2010:342). Feminist spiritualities propose that women's experience provides better ways for perceiving connectedness between dimensions of reality than a dualistic system that will choose the side of power (Zaponne 2010:343). Inclusivity and relatedness, as one characteristic, among others, of feminist spiritualities, result in a life that is lived in this understanding. The reality that one strives towards is the reality that one practises daily and that guides one's life with the goal of the reality being realised. Every dualism that devalues the natural and justifies the brokenness of those who are not socially superior is rejected. As a consciousness, interrelatedness can only result in promotion of fullness and flourishing of all life on earth. When one group on earth, and earth itself are dying, this fullness and wholeness cannot be experienced (Zaponne 2010:344). Nowadays, prophetic theologians, specifically Latin American liberation theologians and feminist theologians, are bold in their holistic liberation message. This message is found at the core of the Judeo-Christian religion (Mananzan & Park 1989:78).

The women's liberation movement challenged women and men to envision a new way of being in the world. Women can find freedom when they can think differently and act in ways that do not fit the past patterns. In these, women will establish new kinds of relationships. This way of being resulted in feminist theory,<sup>13</sup> which provides a theoretical framework for women to express their freedom and "ways of knowing". This framework can shape thoughts and deeds; it relates to other fields for the liberation of all people. Out of lived experience in these relationships a theoretical response was created, addressing how to live in relation to yourself, others, God, and the earth (Zaponne 2010:336). Justice in relation is observed in feminist

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12 Morality differs from lived spirituality because lived spirituality is concerned with personal transformation and holistic integration which morality is not (Spohn 1997:111). Reflective spirituality, analogous to ethics, is concerned with experience as experience itself. Ethics will reflect on theology, history, context, art, anthropology, and hermeneutics and analyse this lived experience (Spohn 1997:112). A relationship between a lived and reflective spirituality is necessary (Spohn 1997:113).

13 See Robinson & Richardson (2015); Evans *et al.* (2014).

spiritualities. The women's movements in South America, Africa, and Asia have noted a metaphor arising from Christian feminism. This metaphor is that God is regarded as our passion for justice; God whose passion for justice arises from the concrete experience of struggle (Grey 2001:46).

## 2.6 Feminist spiritualities are always grounded in experience

Waijman (2002:218) notes a trend in most of the literature on feminist spiritualities. This characteristic is the departure and grounding characteristic of women's experience. When women's experience is shared, it functions as mutual support as well as raising consciousness of the situation.

Schneiders (2003:167) indicates that one cannot separate experience and spirituality. She uses this as the first typical feature of spirituality. Spirituality is a personal lived reality of a person and a group, with both active and passive dimensions. Spirituality enables a person or a group to experience being part of a specific project or being consciously involved in something specific that is not an accidental experience or a structured set of practices. Spirituality and this experience of being part of something is a long-term conscious and dynamic approach to life. Spirituality is holistic, as it involves all aspects of life, mind, body, spirit, emotion, and thought in an integrative manner. Spirituality is the occurrence of life integration that is consistently pursued by self-transcendence towards ultimate value. Christ and Plaskow (1989:3) underline the importance of the role of women's experiences. Women claim and name their own experience. Women's experience should be explored to see how it might transform traditional religion or lead to forming new traditions. Women's experience has broadened.

Women recognise and acknowledge that the patriarchal system greatly influences and conditions the activity of living, the way they create their own experiences. The articulation of the critique on tradition was the first task of feminist scholars in religion. There was also the need to move beyond criticism. A feminist spirituality breaks open these experiences and deconstructs what it is that is expected and what are the real thoughts and emotions authentic to themselves. When women engage in this activity, they start to identify "the myth of the eternal feminine". This myth strengthens the idea that women are passive and closer to nature than men. This myth also enforces that women are emotional and unable to lead in the public domain. Deconstructing experiences enables women to name and engage in the meaning making of their own experiences (Zaponne 2010:339). Feminist theologians also believe in the value of dialogue between present feminist consciousness and religious tradition (Zaponne 2010:340).

Women's experiences cannot be generalised. Each experience of a woman and each personal story contain reasons and their own feminist awareness. The reasons for feminist consciousness vary from individuals to communities. It is influenced by race, a person's educational experience, sexual orientation, and psychological makeup (Zaponne 2010:341-342). For religion to affirm the truth and real value of women, it is necessary that symbols and stories must change. In religion, stories and symbols need to incorporate women's experiences. A feminist experience of being in the world is the redemptive activity of recognising social oppressions. A feminist experience of being in the world reinterprets the traditional experiences associated with being female through feminist consciousness. Reinterpreting these experiences provides a source for transformation of religion and spirituality. All feminists accept that women's experience holds authority. Different feminist theologians differ in the judgement regarding the use of experience (Zaponne 2010:340). Women's experience cannot be heard from one voice:

in the rising chorus that speaks from many standpoints, pressing toward the creation of a society in which all can be heard (Christ & Plaskow 1989:4).

The inclusion of personal experience in feminist work is a way of addressing the critique of false universalism. A personal resource for our work also helps not talking in the third person and saves us from false generalisations (Christ & Plaskow 1989:5).<sup>14</sup>

Spirituality is an individual, personal, and communal phenomenon. Spirituality is focused on who we are, whereas orthodoxy is focused on what we believe. The process of identity formation is an all-encompassing process of socialisation in our community (Dreyer 1999:362). Feminist spiritualities orient one's life. Spirituality influences one's identity as it forms part hereof.

Feminist spiritualities value and use women's experiences in many ways to form new symbols and stories that interpret the meaning of the relationships at present. Women's experiences are also used to sketch and envision future patterns of relationality, whilst balancing both individual and generalised experiences. Each unique woman contributes to the creation of feminist spiritualities (Zaponne 2010:341). This meaningful diversity in feminist spiritualities calls us to listen deeply, to be committed to being inclusive and

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14 The identification of feminists as persons who are weaved into a web of relationships is interconnectedness. "Interdependency encompasses and requires both autonomy and relationality" (Griffin 1996:154-155). Global and interpersonal interdependence is grounded in the experience of women. These experiences differ among classes, races, and religions. Feminist interdependence cannot be viewed separately from ecology. Interdependence always values the experience of the individual (Griffin 1996:155).

create a space for individual and communal differences to emerge (Christ & Plaskow 1989:12).

Taken together, these characteristics provide a firm foundation from which to contribute to realising gender equality, due to the innate aspects of each characteristic and the way in which all of them tend towards non-hierarchy, ecological awareness and harmony, as well as appreciation of diversity (that is, neither heteronormative nor hegemonic). As indicated, spirituality and religion can act as transformative forces and have done so throughout human history. Feminist spiritualities are a way in which women authorise themselves and could act as an instrument that can facilitate change on the road to gender equality. In light of this, current discourses on gender equality within the framework of sustainable development can be enriched by exploring the possibilities of the connections between spirituality, religion, and sustainable development – a point to which we turn in the conclusion.

### 3. CONCLUSION: THE POSSIBLE IMPACT OF A COUNTERMOVEMENT

In 2015, all member states of the UN adopted 17 goals aimed at achieving the sustainable development of humanity in all its facets on planet earth. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) form part of the UN's Agenda 2030, which is a global cooperation attempt towards sustainability. There is a 15-year plan to achieve the goals that are a “universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and improve the lives and prospects of everyone, everywhere” (UN 2015). Progress has been made; however, the rate of progress at this stage might mean that the goals will not be achieved within the time frame that was envisaged. Gender equality is of particular importance, as the findings of the GIWPS-Index confirmed. The COVID-19 pandemic has slowed progress; a renewed focus on gender equality and equity is, therefore, necessary.

There is also an increasing awareness of the possibility of religious communities being actors for the achievement of sustainable development (see Öhlmann *et al.* 2022) and an increased relevance of religion in the development sphere, as noted, for example, in the work of the International Network of Religious Communities and Sustainable Development (IN/RCSD).<sup>15</sup> This, in turn, is related to a “resurgence in religion” (see, for example, the work of Wariboko [2014]). Former assistant secretary-general of the UN and former deputy executive director of UN Women, Lakshmi Puri

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15 See, for example, <https://in-rcsd.org/en>. The network focuses on “teaching and policy-advice in the field of religion and sustainable development”.

delivered a speech in 2017, entitled *The agenda of creating a planet 50-50 cannot come true if religion, religious leaders and faith actors remain outside the conversation*. The planet 50-50 campaign, launched by UN Women in the lead-up to the adoption of the SDGs, was a call from women to governments for national commitments to address challenges that are holding women and girls back from living their full potential. This evolved into the Planet 50-50 by 2030: Step it Up for Gender Equality Campaign that fostered mobilisation and public awareness. Puri's speech emphasised the necessity of the inclusion of religion, religious leaders, and faith actors in the sustainable development conversation. Since then, the campaign transformed into a public mobilisation campaign aimed at raising awareness on the key role that women and girls play in the achievement of the SDGs. Puri made several comments on the power of religion and referred to the significant role that religion plays in the lives of individuals and communities worldwide. Religion, therefore, has a potential that can be harnessed to mobilise parts of society for the transformations that are called for by the UN's human rights, peace and security, humanitarian, and sustainable development agenda.

Research on religion and development have gained much attention over the past decade (Tomalin 2015:1). The UN launched the 2030 Agenda of SDGs<sup>16</sup> with 17 targets to be reached (Babu & Kusuma 2017:1). Religious leaders were part of the consultation process and local faith actors are included in the implementation of the targets. SDG5 is the target of gender equality.

There is still a lack of research and interest in research by international development players in the religion-gender nexus. The role of faith in development policy and practice does not seem to be on par with the role that religion and faith-based organisations play in the daily lives of individuals and communities in the aid industry (Carbonnier 2013:2; Tomalin 2015:1). There is an expanding body of research with a specific focus on the contribution of faith-based organisations and religious leaders to the SDGs and specifically the goal of gender equality. The religion-gender nexus often poses problems in terms of the development discourse (see Khalaf-Eledge 2022). Feminist spiritualities could make a positive contribution within this nexus. The transformation opportunities that arise when listening to the voices of feminist spiritualities is evident when focusing on the characteristics of feminist spiritualities. Even though there is a rich corpus of material on feminist spiritualities, it is not part of the main theological discussion or of the

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16 The sustainable development goals differ from the millennium development goals in the sense that the consultation and implementation process is more inclusive, with a prominent focus on local leaders.

main discussion on spirituality, and it is not mentioned in the discussion on sustainable development and gender equality.

Waaïman (2002:215) describes feminist spiritualities as a subgroup of liberation spirituality that is classified as a countermovement. A countermovement means that, when two voices move against each other, there is resistance against the dominant power. Feminist spiritualities are a voice that women use to speak. In this countermovement, feminist spiritualities enable a marginal group to be heard. By listening to different voices and allowing diversity to connect different people, it is evident that spiritualities have been a means of authorisation for women and marginal groups throughout history.

Feminist spiritualities should have a prominent place in development literature, as there is an integral link between spirituality (and feminist spiritualities) and issues of sustainable development. Hardly any research is being done in this field (Ver Beek 2000:36-37). The inclusion of more voices such as feminist spiritualities in the discussion on sustainable development, can positively shape the language needed to facilitate discussions that concern the religion-gender nexus. When feminist spiritualities and sustainable development are regarded as being in relation with one another, the strong links between the characteristics of feminist spiritualities and the targets of the sustainable development goal for gender equality can be seen.

The South African context is marked by its religiosity and, in the context of this article, its gender-based violence statistics. Religion can act as a perpetrator to keep oppressive gender constructs (within a culture-religion nexus) intact (see Van Wyk 2019:29-50). However, religion is not only the instrument of violence. Feminist spirituality, as set out above, can also act as a liberator. In this regard, feminist spiritualities (in the plural) is of particular importance as a countermovement in South Africa to construct and emphasise a different narrative for women in this country, as agents and persons who can act and speak with authority and construct their own roles and identities. Inherently relational and a celebration of diversity, feminist spiritualities can contribute a great deal to building bridges with diverse groups of women in this country, and with those who have suffered greatly because of their intersectional identities and positionalities. Ultimately, feminist spiritualities creates new ways for building relationships in this country and could even create possibilities for relational leadership. All these aspects could be explored further.



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