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Community Beyond Capitalism: Self-actualising Women Imagining Sustainable Worlds in Budapest

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Abstract:

The present research seeks to understand interviews I have conducted with selected individuals in Budapest, Hungary. Through an analysis based on well-established feminist theory I look at what the dimensions of quality and character of life can be like for those committed to an environmentally conscious lifestyle, and ultimately gives credence to the notion that there might be deeper psychological dimensions of self-development to such a lifestyle, rather than characterising them solely as antagonistic to an established capitalist economic order and plagued with anxiety due to climate change.

Considering the broad spectrum of inquiry the topics of the interviews included elements of, for example, how climate change has affected their lives, what actions serve as response-solutions to the issue, how the family and community around them provides support, how they have changed, are changing and would like to change through their journey and what they imagine an ideal living situation and world looks like. The subsequent analysis is contextualised and constructed with reference to (eco)feminist theories, with particular inspiration from Harcourt (2017) and her framing of transformative local efforts for a good life based on care-full work which are, instead of resistance, understood rather as re-appropriation, re-construction, and re-invention of relationships with oneself, others and with nature.

It would appear this framing is supported by the findings of this thesis and what my research adds to this, is an exploration of a deeper subjective, psychological dimension that the analysis shows in terms of reaching an ecological self through the processes of self-awareness, self-development and ultimately, self-actualisation.

Keywords: feminist political ecology, Budapest, care-work, ecological self, slow violence, collective trauma, nature.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction	5
1.1 The global conversation.....	5
1.2 A sustainable Budapest	6
1.3 Women and climate change	6
1.4 Ingrained cultural norms and gender roles in Hungary	6
1.5 Complications due to mental load and emotional labour	7
1.6 Concerns over climate change can lead to higher levels of activism	7
1.7 Benefits of extending care-work to the community	7
1.8 Aim and research questions	8
2. Theoretical background	8
2.1 Eco and marxist feminist considerations of exploitation	8
2.2 Feminist interpretations of slow violence.....	9
2.3 Acts of slow violence add up to collective trauma	10
3. Methodology and Methods	11
3.1 Constructivist knowledge production.....	11
3.2 Feminist political ecology	12
3.3 Thematic analysis	12
3.4 Semi-structured interviews/Questionnaires.....	13
3.5 Limitations	13
3.6 Positionality	14
4. Analysis and Results	14
4.1 Climate change: I feel angry, I feel sad, I feel grief – I organise!	15
4.2 Work: to do meaningful work for a living is to do what I am passionate about.....	17
4.3 Community: regardless if they support me or not, I must power through.....	18
4.4 Self-care: is paramount, I must find the balance that works for me	19
4.5 Nature: I love her and she loves me	21
5. Discussion	21
5.1 Meaningful work and well-being.....	21
5.2 Satisfying fundamental needs as an avenue for emancipatory power	22
5.3 Harm to the environment means harm to oneself	23
5.4 Steps towards a collective awakening – Kegan’s adult development	24
5.5 Reaching for an ecological self	24
6. Conclusion	25
7. Bibliography	26

The technology we really seek now is love.

Jem Bendell



1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The global conversation

We have reached a point in time where climate change talk is pervasive and manifold in our societies. Even though we have known about the issue of a warming planet and the tipping points this will bring about for decades, only recently are we experiencing the weight and frustrations daily conversations on the topic, both private and political, carry with them.

As opposed to the '60s when oil and gas companies knew about the effects the burning of fossil fuels would have on the Earth's climate and invested fortunes in order to keep this information a secret, we can now not only see, hear and read, but have multisensory experiences (e.g. edible art installations) about what these effects are and how they play out in our lives. Greta Thunberg was not even born when those powerful men, who now mock her activism due to fear of losing their legitimacy, were building their „fossil capital” (Malm 2016) empires based on exploitation (Vertigan and Nelson 2019). The youth strike movement of Fridays for Future (FFF) that started in 2018 (Who we are 2020) really kickstarted a public conversation about climate change and the related structural problems that permeate our societies and gave voice to those whose future is at stake.

It is not just FFF that made such an impact lately in terms of bringing the topic of global warming to the fore, it is also the more radical Extinction Rebellion (XR) that addresses the climate crisis as the most pressing issue of our time and challenges the status quo from the very deep roots as it is not just climate change, as sometimes portrayed, we are experiencing - it is a man-made climate catastrophe that we are on the brink of. Species extinction, rampant social injustice and poverty, top soil and land erosion, extreme weather conditions, racism, sexism, speciesism and so forth are the burning consequences of our disconnection from an environmentally conscious and sustainable living. Albeit operating with a strong civil disobedience technique, oftentimes explicitly calling people to action expecting arrests, the movement has grown into a global one with local groups appearing in most major cities of the world (About us 2020). It is worth noting, however, that no matter how global a movement, a central approach or value position calls for local, grassroots interpretations that identify with and can be effective in specific cultures and societies (Communities 2020).

1.2 A sustainable Budapest

In Budapest, Hungary, as opposed to other parts of the world (e.g. civil disobedience actions in London) the locals have a less confrontational attitude and respond better to the less loud, „raising awareness” type of actions: these include art installations, activist music groups and dialogue based solutions. Moreover, in Budapest there is a rich local „alternative scene”, and in terms of local climate solutions there is a plethora of organisations and local initiatives one can explore when it comes to education, volunteering and providing for an environmentally conscious lifestyle. There are now several easily accessible zero waste shops in the city, second hand stores that only stock used clothes given up by local people, DIY bike kitchens, „farm to table” style catering businesses, organic food boxes delivery, a cargobike sharing platform, a transition town movement, community gardens, eco-markets and there is even a Green Guide Budapest map to sum it all up (Home 2020).

Not surprisingly, all of these initiatives' communication and marketing revolves around the pitfalls of capitalism and critiques of a consumerist society. As mentioned above, they do make up a part of the „alternative scene” in terms of sustainable lifestyle and value systems they adhere to and try to raise awareness about. There are now so many events, talks, workshops and festivals all year round on the topic of climate change and sustainability, that one could not avoid talking

about it even if they really wanted to. Interest has skyrocketed in the past few years and all of this is happening in spite of a government that is not doing much even in terms of sustainable development (Tamás 2019).

This pattern of sustainability awareness and practice I observe in Budapest is not something that was kickstarted by global movements such as FFF and XR, but most initiatives were alive and functioning for years, albeit less loudly. In fact, I believe, one positive outcome of the local FFF and XR activism, by putting the topic of climate change so clearly on the table, was to guide people to already existing solutions in order to ease and support their process of change.

Curious to note, however, that most such lifestyle changes are mainly carried out by women. Even more curious is the fact that most of these initiatives were started and are currently managed by women. There are more active women in this field and more collaborations seem to be taking place between them and their organisations. I became interested in this pattern which later became the foundation of my thesis.

1.3 Women and climate change

There is further nuance to this pattern of women being environmentally conscious because, as it turns out, sustainability is marketed almost solely to women. One will not find a green product in the men's cosmetics aisle. The women's one, however, will overflow, especially in bio/organic stores and pharmacies (Hunt 2020). We already know the health and environmental effects of mass produced beauty products (micro-beads, parabens, environmental costs of production, etc.) so most of these so called „natural” options are probably simply greenwashing (understood as a marketing tool to deceive consumers about a company's efforts for sustainability) (Picardi 2020).

Fast fashion giants now sell the green dream to women, manufacturing organic cotton items with feminist logos to empower young girls (Karlsson & Ramasar 2020). Overall, companies profit from exploiting the behaviours and tendencies associated with the widely held belief that women are essentially closer to nature and thus choose more environmentally friendly looking products and services. Which begs the question - *What is it that makes sustainability and the issues around climate change a woman's job to care about?*

1.4 Ingrained cultural norms and gender roles in Hungary

The question of women's likeliness to care about sustainability issues can be traced back to a correlation with their socialisation as caretakers of the household. As mentioned already above, green marketing exploits an ingrained cultural belief, namely that since women are thought to be closer to nature, based on their ability to give birth, they are automatically more equipped to care for nature and for their families in whatever circumstances (Resurrección 2013).

One must not look too far to realise that traditionally, gender roles dictate that the mother stays home to do all the reproductive work necessary for the family while the father is the breadwinner who works hard and only goes home to eat and rest. In Hungary, a lot of structures still revolve around this idea, which can even be seen when politicians publicly comment that violence against women is due to their lack of fulfilling their female roles. Rather, they purport, a woman must abide the myth of the „good mother” whose sole purpose in life is to embody „romantic, sentimental, scientific, self-sacrificing and consumerist ideals” (author's translation, Csányi and Kerényi 2018). She must be the selfless care-taker of all reproductive work and buy the best products on the market to sustain her family. She identifies primarily as a mother and she proves this through her consumerist practices (ibid).

1.5 Complications due to mental load and emotional labour

Indeed, research shows, that new mothers can be seen to elicit eco-behaviours that improve their babies' well-being and also save money at the same time. Even though energy use becomes more intensive with the arrival of a new member of family, this period can serve as an opportunity to bring about lifestyle changes that are also said to have environmental benefits, such as using chemical-free cleaning products, organic food and clothing, sustainable modes of transportation, etc. (Schäfer et al. 2012). However, if these changes are not implemented consciously and based on a holistic approach from reliable sources, it can simply be an effect of the above-mentioned greenwashing of markets and pressure from consumerism.

On top of the „second shift” (Hochschild 1989) women do at home by going through the daily chores, comes the so called „third shift”, the mental load - like the second shift, also unpaid. Moreover, all the work that takes place during this „shift” happens behind the scenes and includes all the planning, scheduling, negotiating and problem-solving work that goes into running a home and the family. This mental load is accompanied substantially by an emotional labour that often leads to burn outs (Kramarae 2001).

It is not only new mothers who are more likely to report concerns over the environment. Women of all ages seem to be worried about the well-being of the Planet and all life on Earth. Climate anxiety is rampant amongst especially younger women about to figure out and plan their lives and future. The fear that is defined as „of environmental doom”, really triggers questions such as „what am I supposed to do to help solve climate change?”, „is what I am doing enough?” and „do I have a future?” that can paralyze rather than catalyze change-making and meaningful action. There are even individuals who have already taken the decision not to bring children into this world and have even kickstarted a world-wide movement as a result (Taylor & Murray 2020).

1.6 Concerns over climate change can lead to higher levels of activism

Luckily, however, the responses of women all over the world are manifold when it comes to the issue of climate change and its related crises, and their reported environmental concerns in many cases do lead to higher levels of activism (for different findings see Ha and Williams 2020). What I have seen so far prompted me to have an amazing amount of awe and gratitude towards them and their actions.

It has been my observation, amongst others I will detail in this thesis, that even though most house and care-work is still expected mainly of women everywhere, when it comes to finding solutions to climate change and making eco-conscious decisions, they do not spare the energy and extend their care and love towards their families, their communities and the environment. In a study by Eichler and Albanese (2007), a definition of household work is proposed that I find befitting as a stepping stone to the next part of the thesis. It identifies four dimensions of household work: „physical, emotional, mental and spiritual, integrates housework with care work, includes all those who contribute to household work, whether on a paid or unpaid basis, acknowledges cross-household exchange of work and its changing nature over the life course” (227). Furthermore, Joan Tronto captivantly defines care as: „a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (Fisher and Tronto, 1990: 40, emphasis in original, cited in Tronto 2017, 31).

1.7 Benefits of extending care-work to the community

As I have explained elsewhere together with Lazányi, based on the works of other authors, there is benefit to reframing and expanding the concept of unpaid reproductive work to even include other recreational activities and thus allowing ourselves the freedom to care for our and others' well-being and happiness more deeply, in harmony with nature (Csoma and Lazányi 2019). In this new sense, doing *care-full* work (Dombroski et al. 2018) could enable people to re-appropriate autonomy over their lives and have the power to choose between the ways in which they satisfy their needs. Therefore, care-full work could include community involvement and civic engagement and would have the benefit of acknowledging that the extent of people's activities that the market economy devalues or even excludes is larger than previously considered. Thus, the meaning of care-work could move away from the binary of productive work and care-work, with care-work (essentially domestic and reproductive work) serving paid work, especially as we will see in this thesis, most of the women I have talked to have either achieved or are on the path to achieving doing care-full work as a means to subsistence. Moreover, there is some evidence to show that based on this expanded meaning of care-work, uncommodified activities and decisions not driven by profit/market but by social relations can lead to more ecologically sustainable decisions (Hayden 1999; Nierling 2012).

Not only do these women expand their care-work towards their communities, but they actively shape their surroundings in order to create a „politics of place” that serves them and their communities. The present thesis takes its inspiration mostly from an article by Wendy Harcourt, where she provides vignettes into the lives of 3 women in the rural town of Bolsena, Italy who are doing meaningful work, carving out spaces for action and a more sustainable lifestyle within the surrounding traditionally conservative mindset. Amongst others, the conceptual tools Harcourt provides within the framework of *feminist political ecology* have served as guidelines for my own research and writing. She writes:

By listening to the stories of their everyday lives and struggles, I show the dynamic potential of the politics of place and the efforts to build diverse economies and more ethical economic and ecological relationships based on gender-aware subjectivities and values. (Harcourt 2017:1007)

1.8 Aim and research questions

By applying a feminist research perspective, this thesis seeks to understand:

1. in what ways does climate change affect the everyday lives of the interviewed women
2. what actions serve as response-solutions to the issue
3. how the family and community around them provides support
4. how they have changed, are changing and would like to change through their journey and
5. what they imagine an ideal living situation and world looks like.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Ecofeminist and marxist feminist considerations of exploitation

I start my theorisation of the issues addressed in this thesis from the basic *ecofeminist* consideration that the hegemonic, patriarchal structures of oppression that are in place globally have been and continue to this day to exploit both nature and women (and marginalised groups) in many different ways. A shared view amongst ecofeminists is that sexism has resulted in overburdening women as a result of environmental degradation (Sturgeon 1999). Sexism

originates in binaries such as nature/femininity and culture/masculinity imbued with hierarchical relations, norms and values.

Historically, women were understood to be closer to nature given their ability to create new life and thus were deemed keepers and caretakers of the private and the household while men were emancipated/enlightened through their rationality to pursue science, power and politics in the public sphere. The hegemony of such dualism is foundational for understanding the gendered nature of knowledge-formation, politics and economics, where „[p]owerfully energised by the Eurocentric masculine consciousness, sex-gender domination has served as the linchpin for a complex of political oppressions” (Salleh 2017:n.a.). Therefore, the work of feminists has long recognised that the ruling economic system of capitalism often views the environment as a „free, exploitable resource while it ignores or undervalues much of women's lives and work. Thus, the material starting point of ecofeminist analysis is the materiality of much of what the world defines as ‘women's work’ (although it is not necessarily all done by women or by all women)” (Mellor 2005:123).

It is crucial to note, as *marxist feminists* have argued for decades, that unpaid reproductive work materially maintains capitalist accumulation, due to the fact that the worker must be ready to go to work the next day all fed, dressed and rested. Nevertheless, the latter activities are seen as part of the natural cycle of life and do not qualify as economic activity (Salleh 2017). What is more, Salleh further argues, that „[f]or the greater majority of women in the global system of accumulation, sex-gender violence, bodily intimidation and psychological harassment are variously applied to ensure their labour compliance. Materially speaking, a further extraction or embodied debt occurs as women reproduce the capitalist labour force without compensation for their own lost opportunity costs” (ibid:n.a.).

It is extremely clear, when looking at the economic history of Hungary, how the cultural gendering of people's bodies in the form of institutionalised sexism can translate into policies that discriminate in times of austerity – since at least the '50s a strong conservative rhetoric of the mother is politically levied, expressing that her sole purpose in life is to give birth and raise her children while also working in the factory earning 30% less than men. This pronatal (and violently anti-abortionist) discourse not only helped naturalise the exploitation of women's reproductive work but also pressured them into having children in order to fix the population crisis, an issue that is still present today. Furthermore, in times of austerity measures and unemployment, women had to take up even more informal work in order to care for the survival of their families (Csányi 2019).

2.2 Feminist interpretations of slow violence

To take the reality of women's exploitation even further, I would connect it to the idea of *slow violence*, where Nixon (2011) exposes how environmental damage accumulates slowly over time: „a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (ibid:2). Feminists have been for years looking into how the same conceptual framework also applies to women's and marginalised groups' experiences, as it occurs in the „banal, everyday, intimate, and routinised ways” (Christian and Dowler 2019). The imperceptible nature of slow violence is mostly the result of larger gendered epistemologies at play that see the acts of violence as something spectacular and public, something that shakes things up as it happens.

As opposed to the visible fast violence of war and murder, the invisibility of structural violence such as racism and sexism makes it harder to pinpoint who the perpetrators are and thus the causes are oftentimes decoupled from their consequences. In conventional studies of violence

that rest on the widely-held binary of public vs. private, the issues of women's exploitation and domestic abuse over time are obscured for lack of a sensational effect, thus become normalised, banal and passed on to the next generation. The slow effects of different types of structural violence can manifest over a lifetime or carry across to the next generation, however, as a consequence of this realisation feminists have been pointing out how political violence is a personal problem, and thus strongly standing by the slogan „the personal is political”. Moreover, as a result of denaturalising binaries between public/private and intimate/global:

Feminists have fought the reification of objectivity in science and exposed the subjective and emotional dimensions of knowledge creation; they have demanded equal citizenship and protection by declaring 'the personal is political'; they have challenged the devaluing of women's labour by making visible the profoundly productive nature of reproductive work; and they have illuminated how presumably 'natural' characteristics of sex and gender are in fact deeply social. (ibid:1071)

2.3 Acts of slow violence add up to collective trauma

Whether collectively standing up in front of structural and social injustice is a result of natural organising against an obstacle so great it can no longer be ignored or is an effect of acknowledging past traumas and deciding it is time to act for shaping a better world for everyone, it is interesting to look into trauma theory at this point and specifically *collective/cultural trauma*. If acts of slow violence are said to be decoupled from their causes because they happen over a longer period of time and in the sphere of the intimate and often emotional, recognising that such violence can generate traumas and victims is of no surprise. I argue, that the structural slow violence of sexism and discrimination of women and marginalised groups can be seen as a collective trauma from which we need to collectively awaken and heal.

When looked at the individual level, a traumatic experience can be understood as a shock to which a person is exposed and as a consequence, becomes a victim who does not have the necessary tools to process the overwhelming event. Looked at the collective level, though, when too many individuals of a certain group experience similar traumatic events, and especially if they share their experiences with others, thus in a way, traumatising the listener too, a cultural trauma can develop, where people belonging to the same social group can identify with the traumatic experiences of others without having experienced them first hand (Caruth 1995). Examples include the Nazi Holocaust, slavery in the US and September 11, as described in Alexander (2004). What these collective traumatic experiences have in common is the fact that both slow and fast violence were used to instill pain and suffering to people. I would add another example – the witch-hunts of 15-18th centuries and the ones still happening in India and Africa – where a lot of the hunts were/are carried out on the basis of false beliefs, since there was/is no concrete evidence for witchcraft and moreover, those who confessed to being witches did so as a result of different forms of torture.

The toxicity of institutionalised sexism, misogyny and racism (furthermore, their interplay and intersections) allows, to this day, such oppression to manifest in the forms of both fast and slow violence. Federici (2010) goes on to argue, that:

The current persecution of 'witches' is rooted in the intense social crisis that economic liberalization has produced in much of the world, to the extent that it has stripped entire populations of their means of subsistence, torn communities apart, deepened economic inequalities and forced people to compete for diminishing resources. (11)

Gottlieb (1994) in turn draws a parallel between the „collective personal violence toward women and minorities” and „the specter of ecocide, the continuing destruction of species and

ecosystems, and the growing threat to the basic conditions essential to human life” (235). It is not simply a parallel he makes clear, but the fact that through inflicting harm on nature, we are effectively destroying our human means of subsistence. We can thus understand that the exploitation of women and nature, through the structural and institutionalised violence of sexism and racism, has created deeply scarring traumas that we must address as a collective group and bring into the collective consciousness. It is quite clear to see how much slow and fast violence has been inflicted and how much embodied debt has accumulated over the course of history that proves change-inducing feminist critique so urgent. In order to be able to act as a result of those critiques and to prevent the infliction of future violence, the individual and the collective must acknowledge the traumas it has suffered and find an „ethics appropriate to the trauma of ecocide” that is closely tied to all marginalised groups’ oppression and exploitation (ibid:236).

Whether the activist work of women across the world is a result of their self-healing or rather their sustainability work is opening their eyes to the possibility of working through their traumas, one thing is certain: looking at women’s place-based organising through a feminist lens and denaturalising culturally and structurally ingrained gendered epistemologies is vital to creating a more just and liveable community. Considerations of *feminist theory* will help me gauge the ways in which women know and experience their „life worlds” and help paint a picture of their gender-nature-society-relationships dynamic. Namely, by listening and thinking together with these women, I seek to understand their journeys of shaping their local politico-economic spheres and their struggles thereof, „taking into account the intersectionality of gendered experience” (Harcourt 2017:1008).

3. METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

3.1 Constructivist knowledge production

Based on Cobern (1993), for the purpose of this study I assume a *constructivist theory of knowledge production* that holds the following important elements:

1. each and one of us is a 'knowing being' who goes through life accumulating and ordering information based on previously established beliefs and judgements
2. a certain agenda of referents and meanings constitute the basis against which new information is assessed
3. this agenda is influenced by several factors – race, language, economic and education levels, occupation, geo-location, gender, religion and philosophy
4. this agenda is also influenced by context – social world and culture, feelings and subjective experiences as we constantly relate to others.

3.2 Feminist political ecology (FPE)

A most basic tenet of the FPE inquiry is that environmental degradation and its solutions are the very real consequences of political processes and power-relations. By shifting the focus from grand technological narratives to local and varied ways of engaging in political agency that give birth to complex subjectivities, FPE tries to give a set of tools for analysis that takes into consideration the knowledge and life-formation of those marginalised and disempowered (Elmhirst 2018). In this both descriptive and normative context, knowledge of the environment is to be understood as a socially situated portrayal by those who constitute it, live and act in it.

This descriptive and normative context is in turn complicated, but also deconstructed by taking a gender perspective into account. The social category of gender, taken centrally to guide analysis, shows how relations with nature and non-human animals are shaped, what tasks are

allocated to different individuals in different scenarios for specific reasons, whose knowledge and culture is taken seriously and whose is not. According to FPE, the notion of gender is socially constructed – through language, culture and performance – and thus is produced and reproduced over time and space. In this way, certain practices, policies, actions and experiences are shaped along the lines of gender considerations and in relation with ecological, technological and political-economic procedures (Harcourt 2017). By highlighting the diversity of context and space as opposed to understanding experiences as part of a universal and essentialist phenomenon, this type of inquiry is able to lay out „ecological imaginaries and understandings of places” that explore „diverse understandings and practices of sustainability” and build „mutuality, reciprocity, and relationality” (Rocheleau and Nirmal 2015:805).

Moreover, what FPE aims to accomplish through its critique, is to show that there are different ways to care and live in harmony with others and with nature that ultimately account for a „good, sustainable life/living” (Wichterich 2015). I agree with Harcourt when she describes that „sustaining livelihoods is about ensuring fundamental human requirements such as nutrition, ecological balance, clean water, secure housing, gender equality, and meaningful and diverse approaches to labour” (2017:1009). In this sense, livelihoods are more than just having economic means to survival, or to even a comfortable life. Indeed, a good living requires conscious efforts and energy put into the community, interactions, care for the natural environment and future generations. One can do this starting from the level of everyday life, needs and labours that not only include emotional and affective aspects, but give one space to develop and process them.

This idea is echoed also by Elmhirst in her summary of different strands of FPE where she writes that „this extension of feminist political ecology into a relational ontology that takes seriously the emotional, affective dimensions points to a promising avenue for gender and development work more generally: taking seriously everyday embodied practices and affective/emotive relationships” as a starting point for enacting broader political economic pressure and linking the intimate to a wider scale of analysis (2018:5).

I call upon a last point in Elmhirst’s summary that will prove useful in my exploration on this topic, and that is the ethics of care that comes up in narratives around ecofeminism and deep ecology. Reflecting on the intersections between „the care economy, commons and commoning, and a critique of globalised consumption”, actions and movements across the world have sprung up as a result of women doing „ethics of care” (Jarosz 2011), which simply means that they extend their care towards others, nourishing people and the environment as part of “an ethical positioning that challenges the processes of privatization, unfettered capital accumulation, competition and discourses of personal responsibility for inequality and poverty, which construct individuals as neoliberal subjects” (ibid:308).

3.3 Thematic analysis

I undertake my feminist research „with” and not „on” the women I interviewed and worked with for the past couple of years since living in Budapest. As said above, I draw a lot of inspiration from Harcourt (2017) when analysing data below, as her framing of transformative local efforts for a good life are, instead of resistance, understood rather as „reappropriation, reconstruction, reinvention, even re-localization of places and place-based practices and the creation of new possibilities of being-in-place and being-in-networks with other human and non-human living beings” (Escobar and Harcourt 2005:3 in Harcourt 2017:1018).

On the one hand what, I believe, my research adds to this framing is an exploration of a deeper subjective, psychological dimension that the findings and discussion sections will hopefully show in terms of self-awareness, self-development and ultimately, self-actualisation. On the other

hand, I aim to place this finding in terms of eliciting an understanding of our relationship to nature that, I suspect, has great influence on the ways in which these women carry out their various work and make a living. Through mainly conducting semi-structured interviews and/or questionnaires with women whom I have consciously selected to be part of this research, I trace a narrative that frames their lives and work as a response to the issue of climate change and how this struggle propels them toward a more fulfilling life, where they recognise the importance of care for all living beings, justice/solidarity building in the community and environmental awareness.

The method of *thematic analysis* helps me to better understand what meaning-making actions are to be revealed; what psychological states can be identified; what interests are promoted through specific descriptions of the world; and finally, how the social and political world is constituted and regulated through gender and power (Bryman 2012). This type of analysis helps me interpret the data closely with the guidance of the research questions (Kuckartz 2013). After transcribing the interviews, the most important phase included looking for dominant themes through identifying markers such as repetitions, categories, metaphors, similarities and differences throughout the topics, etc. Furthermore, applying the tool of *pattern-matching* helped to identify and analyze patterns of similarity between the assumptions of the theoretical framework on the one hand, and the empirical-historical-material on the other hand when looking at the interviews (Yin 2003).

3.4 Semi-structured interviews/Questionnaire

The first stage of the data-collection was to select female-identifying entrepreneurs, activists, scholars, artists and their combinations thereof, who are on the frontlines of some of the local businesses/civil movements/NGO's that are doing impactful sustainability work at the grassroots level.

The second stage, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, was to use a questionnaire instead of a face-to-face interview in order to keep the „social distancing” restrictions. The reality, however, was that ultimately some of the women who had accepted participation in the study, preferred to do a face-to-face or Skype interview, so the methods used to gather data can actually be split into three in this case, where the second and third one became a semi-structured interview on the basis of the questionnaire that was sent out. Thus, there were 2 interviews conducted face-to-face, 2 interviews over Skype and 1 interview over the phone, all recorded. Moreover, 8 women filled in the questionnaire. The age span of the 13 participants was between 24 and 45, all either currently in higher education or having already graduated. The questionnaire was sent out in total to 19 women, however, some did not get back to me at all or after agreeing to participate, and others unfortunately, could not find a suitable time to meet due to their very busy schedule at the time.

The working language of the questionnaire/interviews was English, unless participants specifically asked to conduct in Hungarian, our native language. Thus, 7 questionnaires were filled out in English, 1 in Hungarian; 2 interviews were conducted in English, 2 in Hungarian and 1 ended up as a combination of the two languages.

3.5 Limitations

The unfortunate events of the COVID-19 pandemic have made it quite difficult to conduct face-to-face interviews. The length of the questionnaire was indeed troublesome, more befitting as the basis for a semi-structured interview as the ones that actually happened very clearly showed. Some of the completed questionnaires I have got consisted of quite short answers to some of the crucial questions but others were well-elaborated with a lot of thought put into them. In this sense, both methods worked quite well in some cases and not so well in others.

The drawback of a face-to-face interview was that responses could not be modified or „taken back”, which is exactly what I wished to avoid by opting for a questionnaire in the first place (it asked participants to fill in, then sleep on it in case more information worth sharing came to mind). The pandemic had yet another unplanned effect: some women were describing more than one living situation, one before the pandemic and one after, with considerable amounts of discrepancies.

Another shortcoming I found was that after letting the „data talk to me”, I realised some questions could have been phrased otherwise or other aspects of one’s life could have been explored deeper. It was only after I have spent a considerable amount of time working through the interviews, that I realised the topic of self-awareness and development could have been delved into more.

Furthermore, the results based on the collected data are not generalisable, as the participants were too few and not selected at random. The purpose, rather, was to bring out common feelings, shared by women who, in many aspects, live similar lives but also diverge in a plethora of interpretations, response-behaviours and insights.

3.6 Positionality

As a researcher, it is crucial to reflect on the ways in which social ties and activist work influence the data collection and analysis in the field of study, through critically exploring the interactions between the researcher and the participants with whom the study is being conducted (Dawson 2010). As mentioned above, having been part of this environment for some years now and having even been part of one of the organisations, it comes quite naturally to identify and feel connected to the participants and their stories, and quite unnatural to remove myself from the field of study and explore it as an „outsider”. I have shared many discussions, some of them quite intimate, on different topics, so these probably affect my positionality and the way I interpret the answers.

I attest to also having a bias towards an understanding of knowledge-formation based heavily on subjectivities and one’s lived experiences. In order to build a more comprehensive epistemology, I believe, devising analytical tools for research that somehow incorporate emotional responses of the researcher in the field is very important. This approach shows, how feelings and states of mind when not doing field-work, can add valuable insight to the data analysis (Davies and Spencer 2010). My bias is based on the belief that doing radical empiricist research complements more traditional research methods and methodologies, and thus the description of a study can become more personal rather than positivist academic.

4. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The respondents were selected on the basis of their social and environmentally sustainable activism in the city of Budapest. After the data was collected and transcribed, a thematic analysis was done in order to identify not only patterns and commonalities, but also differences between the 13 respondents’ lived experiences and subjective life-worlds.

Their initiatives were not described and neither were the quotes contextualised in terms of the initiatives in order to ensure anonymity.

The 5 themes that are analysed below are the following:

1. Climate change
2. Work

3. Community
4. Self-care
5. Nature

4.1 Climate change: I feel angry, I feel sad, I feel grief – I organise!

When asked about the issue of climate change and related crises, all respondents commented positively, in the sense that it is an issue affecting them and those around them in various ways. There was a common thread in the way they placed the problem geographically, since Hungary is a country moderately impacted compared to other parts of the world and thus can be considered to be in a „luckier spot”, as one respondent put it. She went on to say how the issue of climate change is connected to the issue of deep poverty, and how the effects are exponentially worse for people with little resources. Since she started volunteering for a local organisation helping people in poverty, she was faced with the reality that there is deep poverty in Hungary too. She explains, that through her travels and work as an artist raising awareness about environmental issues, she has seen various contexts of the issue of deep poverty where the difference between social classes is starkly evident (e.g. Indonesia).

All respondents mentioned that the extreme weather events, such as unusually warm summers, destructive storms and floods, long droughts, unpredictable seasons all add to making life harder and less reliable, which ultimately complicates everyone’s life, even though in Hungary and especially in an urban setting, these effects of climate change are not experienced so clearly, unless one looks at rising food prices. What is rather felt, though, is the emotional, subjective experiences all of them have regarding this topic. Some of them identify these feelings as climate anxiety, others do not. Interestingly, as another respondent put it reflecting on the COVID-19 pandemic:

I didn't feel climate anxiety until recently. During the quarantine period, I felt for the first time that humanity was incapable of change, and anxiety overwhelmed me. My solution to this feeling is to focus on my own actions.

Indeed, with the impact of the pandemic one could not only see and re-evaluate the importance of certain human behaviours that were taken for granted, such as meeting people and organising in person, but a lot of social media and news, especially in this „green” scene, revolved around the pitfalls of capitalism and consumerism and how these can only be avoided or made better via a systemic change that reconsiders everything from the very roots. While explicating the whys and hows of the pandemic is not the point here, it will suffice to say that the real problem which underlies many of our modern disasters is our disconnection from and dominance over nature. It is not hard to understand, then, that due to our governments’ and transnational corporations’ impatience to get back to business-as-usual, one might feel like humanity knows no transformational way forward. A further emotion that came up in the responses given to the questionnaire was anger and ecological grief. One of the respondents clarifies this feeling in the following way:

I don't exactly find this word [climate anxiety] befitting in my case. Sure, there is anxiety too, and some fear regarding the future, but I am rather angry. Most defining is not even the anger and the fear, but more importantly grief, ecological grief, that heart-rending feeling that comes with knowing or at least having an idea of all what we have already destroyed, and what's presently happening with astonishing and mind-boggling life forms, what we are still causing in spite of everything... Closely related to this is the grief and empathy with and for those people, who, on the other

side of the world, are similarly the victims of this system in the same way nature is.
(author's translation)

It is, however, heartening to notice, that even though most women have experienced climate anxiety or some forms of sadness and grief at some point in their lives, the overarching response to this type of emotions is solutions-oriented based on awareness, consciousness, responsibility, empathy and love for nature and all life-forms. She goes on to explain, that she tries to live a life that has the least environmental impact possible, while still trying to be part of nature and help raise awareness about the importance of lifestyle changes and political agency and action. Her feeling of ecological grief can be noticed also in another respondents' example, where she recalls that due to a deeply felt empathy towards nature and a tendency for anxiety and depression, she experienced quite paralysing effects of the news about the Portuguese wildfires that burned down a strip of forest she had visited not long before. As a result, she could not sleep for days pondering over the destruction, yet her ultimate response to this experience led her to implement a zero-waste lifestyle which later led to different forms of activism together with a group of friends.

There seems to be a direct correlation amongst the respondents' emotive understanding of climate change issues and their actions taken towards a more sustainable lifestyle. More precisely, it appears that by choosing to take more environmentally friendly approaches in the ways available to them in their lives, it can help regulate their feelings of sadness, anxiety, anger, grief and hopelessness. Indeed, the emphasis is on their sense of duty towards doing something about the problem of climate change. For example, the following quote demonstrates how someone, who does not identify with feeling climate anxiety still stands by the idea of sustainable choices:

I do not exactly experience climate anxiety but I think there should be more actions done by governments and decision makers to make a change. People are doing quite a lot by themselves I think already, the need and actions are coming mostly from conscious people who live more sustainably such as using bikes, fly less, buying local products, buying second hand clothes, growing their own veggies, cooking their own marmalade or starting their own sustainable enterprise etc.

The interviewees' professional and personal backgrounds range from entrepreneurs to activists to academics, and their climate-friendly actions and solutions are manifold. From independent, single mothers running socially responsible enterprises to young, PhD activists setting up local strikes and agroecological gardens, they all add incredibly valuable knowledge, dialogue and diversity in the not-only-urban setting of the Hungarian sustainability scene. Some of the very palpable social effects can be seen for example in the case of an eco-friendly community café in the city-center founded especially for mothers to be with their small children in peace, being able to freely breastfeed and change diapers. Since it's 5 years of being active, it has kickstarted other similar initiatives, some even created by municipalities themselves, that have reacted positively to the value such community spaces bring to the life of parents in general, but especially to mothers.

A very similar pattern of „politics of place” can be noticed in the case of an urban sustainable bike logistics center that set up a cargobike sharing platform consisting of pick-up spots across the city where anyone who registers and books online, can rent a cargobike based on donation or barter. Now, roughly 2 years later, requests from different individuals, groups and municipalities that ask for advice, co-operation and training come almost weekly. The next quote exemplifies how, with the passage of time, more and more people see the importance of turning to environmentally friendly approaches to living and being, wherever possible, which gives a sense of fulfillment to those initiating such movements:

It's a good feeling that I have been dealing with this topic for over 10 years now and seeing that some acquaintances, who do not do climate related work and have previously thought that (cargo)biking and local organic gardening practices are stupid, now realise their importance and appreciate the work I do. I remember a time when I was little, watching some documentary about climate change in the early '90s and I asked my mother who would solve this to which she said that I shouldn't worry, they will fix it. It's really motivating to realise that I am now one of those people who is working on fixing the issue. (author's translation)

4.2 Work: to do meaningful work for a living is to do what I am passionate about

Some of the respondents, as the previous one above, are lucky and privileged enough to be able to call their passionate, change-inducing work their wage-bringing work too. Even though it took a lot of time and persistence through fighting with societal gender norms, bureaucracy, regulations and the prejudice of friends and family (in most cases these are still ongoing issues of everyday life), they can finally take a deep breath and announce that they have found their place where they feel fulfilled, doing valuable work that serves the people and their communities. Others, somewhat younger, are still in search of the „good life” and their passion bringing in a stable income. We can see this in the case of an artist, who struggles to find her place and peace of mind without a stable income, yet is not willing to compromise for fear of giving up on her dreams. As she puts it:

When I got back to Hungary it was hard to restart and there is no way to live from art, so I was really suffering that I couldn't focus on art. The PhD is a good temporary solution because you do your thing and get paid for it, it's amazing. I am happy in this position, I don't have climate anxiety, I have existential anxiety, making money and paying bills, creating financial stability is a challenge. The scholarship is not enough to pay rent in Budapest, so I need to figure out a way to make money from my art because if it's not art I am doing I am imbalanced.

The same intention-setting is clear in the case of a young entrepreneur/free-lancer who has been a driving force for sustainable lifestyle changes from raising awareness about veganism and zero-waste practices to mapping green initiatives across the city in order to make it easy for both locals and tourists to choose sustainably sourced products and services when spending time in the urban landscape. She clearly expresses the shortcomings of her previous roles, where even though she was doing work that fulfilled her creatively, she felt she was creating a lot of waste. Sticking by her principle of „do the least harm possible”, she struggles to find a position that ticks the boxes for sustainability, except the work she is doing as a volunteer, which she hopes, with time, can become a self-sustaining enterprise with the possibility of making a living. She also recognises the cons of having a wage-bringing job that is the same as her passion in which she finds the most meaning, because in this scenario the personal and the professional aspects get muddled up, which can become exhausting and complex to navigate. However, the real drawback of one not doing work that one is passionate about is expressed by the following quote of a local activist with a regular job:

My job is okay, but I find it meaningless. Seeing how much there is to be done regarding climate change, I feel like I'm wasting my time for something that's meaningless. At the same time, I can do activist stuff during working hours without anybody noticing and I'm paid well enough so I don't have to worry about it so I can focus on activism in peace.

Doing work one considers to be meaningless can lead to burn out, especially if it is aggravated by one experiencing climate anxiety and feeling powerless, as is the case for the above

respondent. She would much rather be paid for the work she does as an activist, bringing people together to create change in the community, to work towards social and environmental justice within an NGO, however, she recognises that this type of work does not pay, especially in Hungary. Similar visions are set forward by those who are presently struggling to find their „dream jobs” through which they can have a positive impact on society and nature.

My ideal occupation would be a permaculture design trainer / consultant / Earthship retreat organizer. And it should be freelance / personal business / NGO. I need my freedom and not 40 hour per week office job.

4.3 Community: regardless if they support me or not, I must power through

The struggle for finding a meaningful job was not the only struggle expressed by the interviewees. A pattern can be observed when looking at how these women were supported through their endeavours for a more sustainable lifestyle. More exactly, what they expressed most times, is how much support they have lacked from family and friends, and sometimes partners too. There were examples, where a project would take so long to materialise that everyone lost hope except the one dreaming it up and putting all the hard work into it. Other examples included family members regularly mocking efforts for zero-waste or veganism, which were ultimately dealt with reaching the understanding that often people, through mocking, simply express their own frustrations with themselves. Many times these types of criticism were coming from men, sometimes in a close family setting or even academia. It is no surprise, that for example doing a PhD on the topic of alternative economic models such as the solidarity economy, at a leading Hungarian economics university would get one comments such as „what is the point of this research?” or „this is just stupid, utopian stuff – there is no need for this” or some professors would not let a PhD student finish what she has to say, because „she is just a young girl who doesn’t know a thing”. Similar sexist comments can be found when looking at the life of yet another respondent, who explains that:

Inside our organisation being a woman is very much valued - and I do not feel as if I would be any less. However in the farming community, and political sphere being a young woman is not always easy - respect needs to be earned. And sometimes people consider my looks more important than what I am saying, however, I believe that by doing things I talk about people start to respect me. When I say that I am farming, they always ask me whether I am married or have a boyfriend who can help me with it. First, I thought this was revolting, now I see why it would be useful, however I think this is discriminating, as I don’t think they ask a young man of the same age as me if he has a wife or partner to support his ideas.

Such misogyny, mansplaining and machismo in academia and everyday life is rampant. Some forms of toxic masculinity are so subtle one can barely tell. It can simply manifest in the way men are willing to „help” with house and care-work and expect praise. In one respondents’ case her husband supported her in all professional and personal endeavours but did not take his part in doing house work at all. In another case, a mother raising 3 children, doing almost all the house and care-work one can think of and setting up the basis for a social enterprise at the same time, saw her marriage crumble in front of her eyes partly, she thinks, because of the changing dynamics her drive for doing meaningful work and excelling at it brought into the relationship:

It’s very hard starting something new and creative like this as a woman. My children love it but my husband didn’t like it so much. I used to work from home while taking care of the kids, but when the idea came I had to work on it at night and go out a lot

so this changed our family dynamic. *The self-actualising, feminist work I was doing didn't sit well with him.* (author's translation and emphasis)

Fortunately, the above was not a pattern-setting finding. Most depictions of relationships were positive, where the partner in question is consciously taking part in house and care-work and is very supportive of the sustainable work the women do. In one situation, the arrival of a baby prompted the couple to re-evaluate their priorities and lifestyles and together come up with an agreement that worked for everyone. This way they could both work from home while taking turns with caring for the baby and doing house-work. She explains that this situation is not due to luck as others might see it, but due to a very deliberate decision-making process where some things are prioritised over others. For example, making a lot of money is not prioritised over well-being and mental health and having a spotless home is not more important than resting when one is tired. Taking the baby to kindergarten early in order for him to have a social life is more important than succumbing to the pressure that says „staying home with the baby for 2-3 years makes a good mother”. A similar example of a healthy relationship dynamic can be seen in the description below:

In my case my partner doesn't see why it is seen as unmanly or feminine to go shopping in a cotton bag. He thinks that the fact that he cares about the future of next generations could be said to even be masculine. So he feels it is natural that he cares and acts upon these things. It's sad that this attitude is rare but it is possible to find.

Such examples point towards changing gender stereotypes and equity between the sexes that comes also through recognising the „invisible work” carried out mostly by women in the home and in the community. Both men and women must take the effort and do the work necessary for having healthy, meaningful relationships that are free from prejudice, toxic expectations and shaming/blaming. According to a respondent, if her husband washes the dishes and packs them away in a different place, she must also accept that he is an individual with different ideas and thus, will do some things differently. Instead of shaming/blaming in this case for not putting the dishes in their usual place, she can have a more empathetic response and just focus on the result that the dishes were washed and packed away.

4.4 Self-care: is paramount, I must find the balance that works for me

The amount of agency taken when choosing one's friends circle, community, entourage matters greatly, as expressed by some respondents. Not only is of utmost importance for people to take care of their own mental health, but also how much thought is put into this agency seems to correlate with the lack of toxic relationships and the methods used to deal with toxic comments. This approach is very well summarised by some statements one of the respondents made at different times during the interview:

I try to get people to work on their mental health and come to terms with it, to not be a taboo. [...] I don't surround myself with toxic people, I choose who I am friends with. I am not a loud feminist or vegan, I don't get into big arguments, I am quiet, don't like confrontations. I recommend putting on your oxygen mask first before helping others, you need to be in the right headspace. [...] Surround yourself with a positive environment, take care of yourself, make sure you're good and healthy and safe and then go out. Inspiration is always better than guilt tripping, inspire rather than be the I *told you so* person.

The composed, pacifist way of dealing with toxicity is a resolution more women reached in their lives as they have gone through different stages of their journey. Some of them remember being quite radical and loud at the beginning, being furious with the state of things and recognise that

there is work to be done and change to be made. In some cases, trying to convince people to admit that their lifestyles have detrimental effects on the environment morphed into a role people around them simply recognise and look up to in terms of setting an example. Preaching and blaming became kindness, understanding and empathy for showing an alternative way forward or one simply minding their own life, changing only what is possible to change.

I became soft and flexible. I see this often, when people start work in this field they are fierce and active, they argue strongly, and judge easily but I think this comes from fear, at least in my case it did. We need to work on this and take it easy and work on ourselves, we must avoid poisoning each other especially when we talk about poisoning the environment, we must take a different attitude. I still meet these people and always realise this is what we shouldn't do!

Similarly:

I am not an aggressive militant, I do believe people have to make their own choices to do a long-lasting transition, however, I am always ready to give my input and advice when asked. It is quite nice to see how people close to me have been strongly influenced by the things I do, and how it changed their life. It is somewhat important for me, as I like to spend time with people with similar values, or respecting my values, as I respect theirs.

Such understanding and change in personality through one's varied experiences in this field can only come as a result of self-awareness and a willingness to challenge one's deeply held beliefs, biases, judgements and letting go of what does not come from a place of love for ourselves and others. Finding balance between meaningful work (that can be tiring, challenging and the sense of duty overwhelming at times) and self-care can be a source of stress to some due to lack of time and resources. All respondents, however, admitted to paying attention to this very important commitment to self-care, which not only comes through one doing meaningful work but also through getting to know oneself better, working through traumas, having more purposeful relationships with friends, family and nature, taking life at a slower pace and doing activities outside of one's work that give a sense of happiness, flow and peace. Here are the activities/hobbies carried out on a regular basis that were mentioned: meditation, yoga, running, dancing, cooking, sewing, knitting, painting, walking/hiking, being with friends and family, travelling, linoleum printing, gardening, DIY cleaning products, reading, petting animals, embroidery, swimming, cycling, writing, self-development, playing board games.

Some of the feelings described when doing these activities were:

Brings out my creative side and brings, as well, great satisfaction.

When I'm creating something, making art, my mind is focused on a task (so I'm not worrying or overthinking), and in the end, I have a result that is beautiful and I can be proud of.

I love long distance running. That gives me strength and happiness. That helps me to be in shape and love myself and also it's a perfect time to be completely by myself. It's a plus that I can do it in nature that fills me up with oxygen and energy. Running helps to keep my mental health in balance and gives me confidence too about my body and myself, that I can reach my goals in life and I am happy about what I have achieved so far. Running gives me the feeling that I can reach anything that I want.

When I garden I feel some kind of power in myself. I feel strong and focused, helpful and happy. I also feel more caring and attentive. This is something I like to share with other people and would like to work for.

4.5 Nature: I love her and she loves me

One of the main means by which these women recharge is being in and with nature. A deep sense of fascination and love can be said to be originating from a felt belonging to nature, from the realisation that we are connected to all life and thus ought to cherish and be guardians of the ecosystems of life. The following quote sums up the feeling that was echoed by all women:

I am but a tiny manifestation of nature and I gaze in awe at the rest. (author's translation)

Knowing that hitting the right balance between work and self-care can sometimes feel unattainable, when asked how they imagine their ideal living situation, the responses were, not surprisingly, varied. Some wished for longer days and better time management skills, others felt they have reached a sweet spot where it is even possible for them to look into other ways of doing meaningful work on top of what they already do. Some imagined travelling to places where fresh, healthy food is abundant and the ocean is near, others simply wished everyone would just have more time to listen and be with one another. Overarching feelings of the need for justice, solidarity, community empowerment, peace, equality, mutual respect, liberty, participatory/direct democracy, diversity, harmony, consciousness, generosity, care and love were to be found in all cases. To sum up:

The respect for life would be paramount in all communities. Being part of a community of people and nature would define people's identity and thus safeguarding all forms of life would be of utmost importance. Being part of a community, useful work and living close to nature would become our primary values instead of ownership, economical status and other such externalities. This way people could be content only with what is materially necessary and could turn their energy towards doing good, helping others and their self-development. Diversity would be a greater value, it would allow for the survival of local cultures and we would not need to be homogenous in order to accept and respect each-other. (author's translation)

In the next section, I aim to look at contextualising some of the findings from these analysed interviews in terms of the chosen literature that advances some of the feminist theory mentioned in the theoretical background of the present thesis. I shall touch on concepts such as the ecological self and a search for a 'good life' through a process of self-actualisation whereby one also recognises the importance of a compassionate relationship towards nature.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Meaningful work and well-being

The above findings support previous research done on the topic of community care-work and women's place-based organising. Jarosz (2011), while avoiding an essentialist connection between women and the environment, suggests that, instead of primarily being motivated by economic factors, women in her study rather looked at their social-goals achievements in terms of living a meaningful work-life balance. In her case, organising Community Supported

Agricultures can thus be seen as work that is satisfying basic needs of people while also taking care of the environment using regenerative agricultural practices.

The practice of organising a community based buyer's co-operative many times originates in an observed lack of fresh, healthy and seasonal food in one's immediate urban environment which can empower a group of people with shared interests to connect the farm and the city through a sustainable initiative that takes everyone's well-being into consideration. Considering such examples of community organising, Weeks (2011) suggests we reframe the idea of care-work and expand it to include such activities that give us a sense of freedom of agency to care for our and others' well-being and happiness. In this new sense, doing care could enable people to re-appropriate autonomy over their lives and to have the power to choose between the ways in which they satisfy their needs.

Thus, care-work can be understood as decommodifying the ways in which a capitalist neoliberal structure pressures us into being productively part of growing the economy and allows one to develop passions in an autonomous and emancipatory fashion by practicing alternative forms of subsistence (Nierling 2012). Engaging less in capitalist waged labour can subsequently have several positive impacts on one's personal social life and it can also facilitate a path towards a more ecologically sustainable lifestyle (Hayden 1999).

This reframing of care-work that includes care for oneself, the community and the environment at large presupposes that these additional areas in which valuable but „invisible“ work is being done constitute a fertile ground in which seeds of empowerment and change can be sown. However, one's sense of duty for doing meaningful social work can easily get silenced in male-dominated political engagement. According to Harcourt and Escobar:

For many years, women's movements have been creating diverse avenues for entry into [the social public] space... In redefining what counts as political, and at the heart of politics of place, is an implicit challenge and renegotiation for what is discussed and valued in public. Networking and alliance building are at the core of women's movement into the social public space. (2002:9)

Thus, it is important to listen and emphasize these women's voices who, according to one of the respondents' observation, are seen to be doing more self-sacrificing work in general than men in the same field in order to get their and their communities needs across.

5.2 Satisfying fundamental needs as an avenue for emancipatory power

Putting an upper limit on self-sacrifice and navigating the need for a healthy work-life balance were issues almost all respondents voiced, one way or another. It seems this particular conundrum pointed towards mental health considerations and an overall sense of well-being. In the light of explicating this psychological dimension a little further, Max Neef's Human Scale Development matrix stands in stark contrast to the usual Maslow's pyramid, where fundamental human needs are portrayed as parallel in the former and not as hierarchical as in the latter. Elements of the 9 needs of subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, leisure, creation, identity and freedom must simultaneously be present in one's life in order to secure the „growing levels of self-reliance, the construction of organic articulations of people with nature and technology, [the] global processes with local activity, the personal with the social, planning with autonomy, and [the interactions of] civil society with the state“ (Max-Neef et al. 1991:8).

This interpretation of fundamental human needs carries a built-in emancipatory power that is generated by a mechanism that informs the agent of an absencing satisfier and allows one to embark on a moral journey towards freedom from constraints. Based on the matrix, Bhaskar's

transformational model of social action first identifies structures that inhibit human freedom, challenges them and then reinforces structures that boost it. Bhaskar identifies three conditions for action, namely „knowing”, „possessing the opportunity” and „being disposed to act in one’s real interests” (Bhaskar 1989 as quoted in *Critical Realism and Health* para. 8).

Bhaskar’s transformational model of social action can be complemented by the work of Archer (2000), who, through her *model of personal and social identity*, argues that agents come to possess autonomous transformative powers that emerge from our relationship with society, and are able to modify unwanted structures. Indeed, individual and collective agents have the „resources to act creatively in the world, thus creating conditions for transformation and change” (Clegg, 2016:502). This action, however, is predetermined by an „internal conversation” that enables one to reflect upon themselves in order to identify missing needs, make commitments and seek to organise with an interest group which then materialises into a „very special punch they pack as far as systemic stability and change are concerned” (Archer 2000 as quoted in Clegg 2016:503). Such groups are time and again showing how solidarity, trust and mutual aid are universal values that bring about the flourishing of fundamental human needs and their adoption constitutes a fight to remove societal and cultural constraints that impede freedom and happiness.

The findings of this thesis support the above models of transformation and serve as examples of solutions-based activism that originated from identifying missing needs (e.g. lack of: social space for new mothers; fresh, organic food; sustainable modes of heavy load transportation; knowledge on waste reduction).

5.3 Harm to the environment means harm to oneself

Considerations for women extending their care-work by shaping their place-based politics through powerful agency brings us to a transformative understanding of also the relationship between women and environment, where instead of the different elements of capitalism exploiting an essentialist approach of „the female”, she is able to develop an agency through which she organises an empowering setting that brings about a more just and equitable society (Escobar and Harcourt 2005). More exactly, women do not exhibit eco-friendly behaviours because they are naturally more in tune with nature, but because, having initiated a process of self-awareness through the „inner conversation”, they have reached a higher level of human understanding as a result of which they can empathise with all forms of life and recognise, that ultimately, *harm to the environment means harm to oneself*.

This idea relates back to Gottlieb (1994) mentioned in section 2.3, whereby people of a certain social group can transcend their socialisation through the process of self-knowledge and knowledge of the world, and thus harbour means for emancipating political action that is necessary to overthrow the status quo. In this case, a relevant example would be the „feminist process of consciousness-raising” (226) that aims to shed light on the reality of the traumas patriarchy caused by objectifying women, minorities and nature, carving space for creative re-appropriation of life-worlds to reflect a „dream of an ethical cosmos of care and compassion” (234). The utopian imaginaries that were elicited towards the end of the interviews/questionnaires (the need for justice, solidarity, community empowerment, peace, equality, mutual respect, liberty, participatory/direct democracy, diversity, harmony, consciousness, generosity, care and love) seem to support values that might help a collective awakening and transition to a kinder society, where all forms of life can live in harmony with each-other. What is hindering us from this *collective awakening*?

5.4 Steps towards a collective awakening – Kegan’s adult development

In order to help answer the question regarding collective awakening posed in the previous section, Rowson (2019) sums up the answer very effectively when he writes how „[o]ur inability to see how we see, our unwillingness to understand how we understand; our failure to perceive how we perceive or to know how we know” is the culprit.

Going back to the argument that our modern societal problems are due to our disconnection from nature is to say that the forms of knowledge that pervade our times are a result of hierarchy building dualisms perpetuated by a euro-patriarchal system that views nature, women and ‘the other’ as inferior beings and subjects to freely exploit with the use of power and force. This system is based on the virtue of rational thinking, quantitative science and individualism, and underplays the emotive and subjective dimensions of human lives and livelihoods. The following section attempts to argue for the benefit of attempting to see ourselves and our connection to the environment more holistically, as I believe, the interview/questionnaire respondents are aiming to reach through their own personal journeys.

According to Kegan’s theory of adult development, comprising of 6 stages, most people are stuck at stage 3, characterised by an overwhelming need to identify with social norms, beliefs and specific systems from our exterior environment. In order to evolve from this stage, he explains, one must gradually let go of the things one identifies with (Subject) and look at them objectively as something one has (Object) i.e. beliefs, traits, feelings, desires, needs. By this process, one is able to critically reflect upon experiences and beliefs without them defining a person’s essence. Actually, the last stage of this theory purports, that people in this stage do not identify with any strongly held beliefs as they become „more tentative and less certain about their theory, seeing that any system of operating is temporary, preliminary, and self-constructed”, but rather are willing to openly listen to others and co-construct experiences, even admit that they might be wrong. Moreover, Eriksen (2006) writes:

The interindividual person is able to take the transformational process as object, to hold the tension involved in the transformation concurrently with the product that emerges. The interindividual person equates this process, rather than its resolution, with being awake or alive. (296)

Since Kegan’s theory is a constructive developmental one that ultimately explains our meaning-making processes and analyzes how we „know” epistemologically, it shows how we are “active organizers” of our own experiences (Kegan 1994:29 in Eriksen 2006). This is important because, as we proceed, hopefully consciously, through the developmental stages, the principles by which we „construct and organise” our „thinking, feeling and social relating” morph from what we „identify with, [are] tied to, fused to or embedded in” to something we can „reflect on, handle, look at, be responsible for, take control of, internalise, assimilate or otherwise operate on” (ibid:32, ibid). People can thus act from a place of awareness and emerge as actively shaping their meaning-making activities as individuals, regardless of gender, class, and other background limitations.

5.5 Reaching for an ecological self

Kegan’s theory of adult development, I believe, facilitates our understanding of where we are, what work needs to be done and where we need to get in order to reach a state of affairs that is harmonious and just, equitable and caring. Aiming to reach higher states of human development would allow us to create more open and accepting societies, more caring and intimate relationships and would create space for different onto-epistemologies to transform our destructive europatriarchal knowledge system. As activist and author Minna Salami (2020) puts

it while explicating her theory on sensuous knowledge and exousiance, whereby integrating alternate forms of knowledge-making can re-appropriate our understanding of power:

Exousiance is an understanding of power attuned to self-realisation and collective metamorphosis. The concept acknowledges that we exist in a synergetic and reciprocal ecosystem where hierarchical fragmentation is self-defeating. We are individuals but we are also a multitudinous organism. If one part of the organism is exploited and diminished, the entire apparatus is weakened.

Similarly argues philosopher Arne Naess (1995), giving further credence to the idea that one's enlargement of the ego-self to an eco-self results in environmentally responsible behaviour as a form of self-interest and this can only come as a result of the process of self-actualisation, or as Minna put it above, self-realisation. Indeed, Kegan's theory of adult development aids the transcendence of one's egoic self (still at the whim of automatic reactions according to Subject) to a more encompassing world-view that can incorporate the well-being of other beings, what Naess calls the eco(logical)-self. It follows then, that of crucial importance to reach an eco-self is the realisation, that as human beings, we are essentially relational towards others and our development as individuals flourishes through interaction with them and the environment. Grimshaw agrees, by rejecting an individualistic, egotistic view of human nature and explaining that due to our immediate, intimate and wider levels of connection to other beings, if we pursue the interests and well-being of others, we consequently also pursue our own (Grimshaw 1986; argument echoed also in Plumwood 1993 and Naess 1995).

To sum up, Plumwood (1993) explains that applying feminist critique to our dominant power structures allows us to re-conceptualise a model of relationship to nature that helps us reach our ecological selves and care more deeply for our environment:

Recent *feminist* accounts of the structures involved in sexual domination can contribute to an understanding of structures of *human identity* involved in domination of nature. Feminist accounts of the *formation of self through relationship* and difference have, I argue, much to contribute to an understanding of the *ecological self*. I consider the mutual self as providing an alternative account of relations to nature which both *breaks down self/other dualism* and provides a model for relations of *care, friendship and respect for nature*, and hence for the *ecological self*. (142, author's emphasis)

6. CONCLUSION

Having gained distance and sophistication of perception we can turn and recognize who we have been all along... we are our world knowing itself. We can relinquish our separateness. We can come home again – and participate in our world in a richer, more responsible and poignantly beautiful way. Joanna Macy

The present thesis has attempted to shed light on the subjectivities and lived experiences of 13 women who do important work in Budapest in terms of carving out spaces for themselves and their communities to be able to live a sustainable, more fulfilling life.

The theoretical and cultural background for this touched on aspects such as the europatriarchal knowledge system based on dualism and binary thinking, the exploitation of women's reproductive work and nature by a system of powerful patriarchy and the effects of slow violence that can be understood in terms of cultural, collective trauma. Women's self-awareness of their social group's traumatic history and its parallels with the ecocide that presently plagues the Planet can be understood as a stepping stone to effect transformational change locally, starting

from the grassroots, recognising the urgency for satisfying fundamental human needs and beyond.

The analysis of the interviews conducted revealed a surprising common thread that ran along the lines of self-awareness, self-knowledge, self-development and ultimately, self-love. If put into a deep ecology context, this finding is to be understood not as a selfish focus on one's inner world and needs, but as a transcendence facilitating the extension of a narrow understanding of the concept of self. Truly caring and loving one's self is ultimately, caring for and loving nature. If, following in the footsteps of these women, we learn to see our environment as the basis which gives us subsistence, an ethics of compassion and kindness are self-evident.

Have these women reached a state of *ecological self* whereby they 'live and let live'?

It is my observation, through talking, listening, acting and playing (together) with these women, that at the very least they have started going down the path of least resistance, recognising that it is only worth changing what one can change, and that very first step resides within ourselves.

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