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Don’t Lean In: Natasha Walter on Ecofeminism

Article by Ros Taylor
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With parts of the feminist movement drifting towards personal empowerment and green actors emphasising cost of living issues, few voices remain connecting the dots between ecological and feminist struggles. Yet studies show that rising temperatures increase domestic violence, and women are more heavily impacted by food scarcity during draughts and floods. How to build counterpower at times of gender and climate backlash? Ros Taylor spoke with the author of *Feminism for a World on Fire*.

When I meet Natasha Walter towards the end of August, Britain’s arid summer is at last beginning to ebb. A few drops of rain have fallen on the yellow, desiccated parks, but not enough to revive them. In the past eight weeks, north London has had just two millimetres of rain.

But the drought and wildfires barely impinge on the political round. Andy Burnham, the new prime minister, belatedly sends a text message to Britons urging them not to light unnecessary fires. His new secretary for energy security and net zero, Miatta Fahnbulleh, will open up a North Sea gas field for drilling. Her Conservative shadow, Andrew Bowie, declares himself the “energy security secretary”, dropping any reference to net zero.

As temperature records are broken, the fight seems to have gone out of Britain’s environmental movement. Perhaps they expected the proof of global heating and multiple energy crises to concentrate politicians’ minds on the green transition. If so, they were very wrong. Instead, the talk now is almost exclusively of adaptation and how to generate enough electricity for air conditioning. Even the Green Party now mainly focuses on the cost of living and overheated workplaces. This has helped them in the polls, but it has done little to keep up the pressure to phase out fossil fuels.

Climate of repression

For activists like Walter, who was arrested in 2019 at a climate protest, the sense of powerlessness is distressing. Even as the Labour party made progress on decarbonising the grid and expanded wind and solar energy, it continued to crack down hard on environmental protesters. Judges imposed long prison sentences on people blocking roads and prevented them from mentioning their motives in court, so as not to sway a jury. In 2024, nine people who were arrested on their way to a planned action at Heathrow Airport spent ten months on remand before they appeared in court. The harsh sentences have significantly reduced climate protests in the UK. The government has also designated the pro-Palestinian group Palestine Action as a terrorist organisation, meaning that anyone who expresses support for it is liable to be prosecuted for a criminal offence.

“I feel so angry about it,” Walter says. “I really feel that there was a possibility when the first wave of climate activism was happening. You know, around 2018, a lot of people were taking to the streets. It was disruptive, [though] it wasn’t terribly disruptive to most people’s everyday lives. And I think it brought a lot of people together. It coalesced a sort of sense of urgency, and the community around that urgency.”

“And I think that some mainstream political parties on the left or towards the left could have done a lot more to connect with that energy, to learn from why people were coming out, and actually to support that energy and work with those desires to find ways forward. I find it really so baffling. And I feel so angry with this Labour government.”

She admits some of the actions “weren’t brilliantly planned or executed” – Just Stop Oil activists throwing soup at Van Gogh’s Sunflowers in the National Gallery in 2022, for instance – “but that’s OK. These sorts of movements are messy. But I just find it insane, the level of repression, and how little mainstream liberals and conservatives, left and right, have stepped up to this.”

Time for ecofeminism

Walter came relatively late to climate activism. In The New Feminism (1998), she argued that women needed to stop policing each other’s behaviour and focus on securing political power and equality. *Living Dolls* (2010) tackled the sexualisation of culture and what it meant for women. Her latest book,*Feminism for a World on Fire*, imagines a feminism that acknowledges what the climate crisis means for women, especially but not exclusively in the Global South. Feminism, she argues, has let itself be subsumed by the consumer society and dreams of personal empowerment. It has stopped being political. She wrote *Feminism for a World on Fire* partly out of a sense of frustration that the environmental movement in the UK seemed to have no space for ecofeminism.

“When I was in Extinction Rebellion, I was really struggling to get women together to talk about feminist ideas in the environmental movement.” There was an emphasis on care, she says, and feminist principles guided the movement, but somehow it did not quite come together. Yet, for Walter, the movements are meaningless without each other. “Environmentalism without feminism is a patriarchy in the forest, but the women’s movement without environmentalism is a women’s centre on a dead planet.”

Bringing the two movements together is all the more important when mainstream feminism has become a marketable commodity to which the big tech companies pay lip service, and where women must climb over each other to reach the top. She says “this rhetoric of Lean In, ‘You go girl, give zero fucks, keep moving on, keep moving up’” reached an apogee in 2025, when Amazon’s chairman Jeff Bezos launched six women into sub-orbit to promote his Blue Origin space programme.

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“The interests of capitalism feed off that kind of self-empowerment. It suits capitalism. You can sell women more goods, more stuff with the message that you can liberate yourself just through shopping, through constant makeovers and renewal… I was quite shocked when I started using Instagram by how many women that I thought of as feminists are engaged there in just selling stuff.”

Platforms have enabled some women to establish vast personal brands, but have also fed a form of apolitical narcissism. In the past decade, Walter says, the women’s movement has atomised, with “less and less empathy and solidarity between women from different parts of the world and different backgrounds.”

As director of the charity Women for Refugee Women, she found herself increasingly frustrated by performative, celebrity-driven events that felt very distant from the lives of ordinary women. At the same time, charities working with vulnerable women became more professional. There is more transparency and clearer guidance about how to act, but something has been lost. In the 1980s, one activist told her, women who reported domestic abuse would be supported, driven to a refuge, and hugged. “Now I see my colleagues taking that same call. They are polite. They go through the safeguarding checklist. They give her another number to call…” Grassroots work is vital because it is “where women find the tools for survival”.

In the UK, the Rochdale child sexual abuse scandal, where girls were raped by groups of men of mainly Pakistani origin between the 1990s and 2010s, has become a rallying point for the far-right Reform UK and Restore parties. They claim that the failure to prosecute the rapists for years shows that feminists did not protect girls for fear of being seen as racist. Walter, however, argues that the scandal persisted because the police did not listen to women working in frontline organisations.

She has spent time with women’s groups in the Middle East, and *Feminism for a World on Fire* reminds readers that however frightening global heating seems in Europe and the US, it has even worse consequences for the Global South. The impact specifically on women is under-researched, but the work we do have shows that women are more likely to die than men when food is scarce and during droughts and floods. Domestic violence rises during climate crises. A UN study found that it increases by 4.7 per cent for every 1-degree Celsius rise in global temperature. Another study on heatwaves in Kenya found that pregnant women were vulnerable to cardiovascular problems in high temperatures and were still expected to collect water. *Feminism for a World on Fire* reminds readers that however frightening global heating seems in Europe and the US, it has even worse consequences for the Global South. The impact specifically on women is under-researched, but the work we do have shows that women are more likely to die than men when food is scarce and during droughts and floods. Domestic violence rises during climate crises. A UN study found that it increases by 4.7 per cent for every 1-degree Celsius rise in global temperature. Another study on heatwaves in Kenya found that pregnant women were vulnerable to cardiovascular problems in high temperatures and were still expected to collect water.

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“When societies are stressed, men are often taking out that stress and that precarity on women … It’s here, it’s now. You know, women’s crops are already failing because of the droughts and then the cyclones in Malawi. The girls living in the areas affected by floods in Bangladesh, they’re already missing out on school, they’re already being married off early. Their future is gone.”

Involvement at all levels

How to conclude a book that sets out the scale of the crisis and the misery to come? Walter admits it was difficult. She feels the least satisfactory sections of her previous two books about feminism were her efforts to direct people to organisations that were doing good work. Instead, “We need to have more faith in the idea that we can get involved in our community,” and organise to achieve a particular goal.

She is drawn to local activism, partly as an antidote to the sense of powerlessness that has seized the

environmental movement, but also as an alternative to the endless scroll of digital “engagement”, a “relentless roll call of pain” – and because, as 1980s activists knew, only by meeting people face-to-face do we come to understand the messy complexity of their lives.

Walter acknowledges that the kinds of frustrations and compromises involved in unglamorous, local activism are by no means easy. “I’m not romanticising it, but I think it’s the only way to rebuild in the face of what we’re facing now.” Naomi Klein and Astra Taylor’s new book *End Times Fascism* offers a similar vision for local activism in the face of Big Tech dominance and the rise of the far right.

I ask Walter why so few women, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez excepted, are leading the charge against Trumpian politics and environmental destruction. Zohran Mamdani is the great hope of socialists in the US, and the figureheads of the British left are men: Zack Polanski leads the Greens in England and Wales, while Labour has never had a female leader in its entire history. The European far right, by contrast, has cultivated several charismatic women leaders, including Giorgia Meloni, Alice Weidel, and Marine Le Pen.

“I think women who try and emerge on the left as leaders just feel too disruptive,” Walter says. “They break the mould of what our societies want to see in women too much, and they’re not valued. They face such a barrage of misogyny from their enemies. It just makes them unviable as leaders, as we saw with Hillary Clinton and Kamala Harris. I’m not saying they were particularly charismatic or progressive leaders. Very problematic, I think, in many ways.” Both the former New Zealand PM Jacinda Ardern and Finland’s Sanna Marin left frontline politics before middle age also because of intense backlash.

But the fact that female leadership is lacking should not deter women from getting involved. “We need more women climate leaders. But I also think we need more good followership. I think we need, as women, to get involved in stuff.”

“And you can make a change by contributing whatever you contribute. I really like telling stories and drawing out threads. But I also like doing the other stuff, just standing at the stalls at the eco-fair or going along and helping in the community garden or with the drop-in at the women’s centre.”

Stepping up

An earlier generation of radical feminists might observe that this is what middle-class British women like Walter have done for centuries – volunteered in their communities, unpaid and largely unnoticed, meeting the needs that the state will not. Is this a flight from catastrophe into the private sphere, a 21st-century version of Voltaire’s *il faut cultiver notre jardin?* But Walter’s feminism is anchored in the city, in the marches and demonstrations she still regularly attends. “I’m not much of a hippy. I’m living quite a normal urban life. People see ecofeminism in a maybe more radical and hippy box than that, and I’d like to say no, this is for everyone.”

Walter’s feminism is alive to the cruelties that emerge when people compete for scarce resources. As a charity leader, she saw “such divisions between women, hardening borders, that dehumanisation that creeps into people’s rhetoric”. In the UK, where groups of black-clad, balaclava-wearing men have been gathering to block roads and demand Britain “stop the boats”, the sense of fracture is acute. The Left observes bitterly that when climate protesters – some of them elderly women – lay down in the street, they were put in jail: the men of the far right, on the other hand, have been allowed to disperse without being arrested.

Towards the end of the book, Walter recounts seeing on her phone images of “the body of a female

fighter being thrown from a building" in north-east Syria, where she had visited a group of women planning a better future. She tries to apply the lessons she learnt there about female solidarity in London, too. "When I feel really lost about the way forward it's often the women around me who keep me going," she writes. None of them "only spend their time asking other people to do things… They use their own talents and courage, and put them to work."



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