

Reclaim the Climate - Feminisms and ecology

In this episode, Julie Lebrun welcomes Myriam Bahaffou and Fanny Lajarthe, both researchers and activists in France and Belgium, to address the issue of the links between feminism and ecology. In the introduction [00:23 ►8:15], we introduce ourselves and present the reasons that made us link these two issues. Then, we talk about the links between the two, ecofeminism, and the reproduction of power relations in activist ecological spaces.

1. What are the links between feminism and ecology? (8 :15 ► 31 :01)

There are many ways to approach the links between feminism and ecology because these links are not only structural, but also individual, collective, historical, philosophical... the podcast would last 3 hours if we listed them all, even if in general we are not very aware of them.

One of the starting points is that patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity is one of the main drivers of climate change, which is reflected, among other things, in this idea of endless progress that runs against ecological limits. Another way of looking at it is to raise the gendered dimension of carbon footprint, or adaptation to environmental disasters. But, more importantly, women have always been at the forefront of most environmental struggles: think of Rachel Carson's influence on environmental thinking in the 1960s, the Chipko movement in India against deforestation in the 1970s, the anti-nuclear movement of the 1980s in the United States. Women have always been involved at the individual or collective level for their survival and that of the people around them, to have a healthy environment and sometimes to protect their children. The idea behind these struggles was to create spaces to call out an aggressive attitude towards living things, carried by an ideal of virility, which is at the root of the ecological problem. We can also see the links between feminism and ecology in the construction of what masculinity and femininity are: our view on nature and our relationship to this notion has really been central in gender construction. Therefore, we can ask ourselves what to do with these constructions: should they be abolished? Should we strive for more femininity?

We then talk about our feelings about ecology, addressing the issue of despair in the face of ecological disasters: ecology is a feminist issue, insofar as it is really related to empathy and emotions. However, there is a lack at the political level on this relationship between emotions and ecology. Ecological discourses and struggles are really marked by rationality, i.e. we very often refer to figures, articles, climatologists, etc., as a way of making a point. This is linked to the history of the environmental movement in northern countries, which developed in correlation with the scientific work of the time: if we take the climate movement for example, the challenge was for a long time to prove the existence of climate change in order to legitimise its struggle. One of the problems which come with these rational discourses is that, when we talk about reducing greenhouse gas emissions or carbon footprints, we become elitist and we don't reach everyone, especially not the people who are primarily concerned by climate issues. Indeed, we must really change the narrative.

2. What is ecofeminism? [31 :01 ► 41 :59]

The greatest difficulty of ecofeminism is to define it, because it is precisely its diversity that makes it so rich. We could speak of ecofeminisms in the plural because it is a very fragmented movement. It is a movement that dates back to the 1970s: the term was coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, who showed that it was necessary to think about women's autonomy and that women's struggles were needed to respond to environmental problems. The movement also has pacifist roots, since it really took off in the 1980s in the American anti-nuclear movement (with slogans such as "*take the toys from the boys*"). However, there are movements that can be called ecofeminists but that did not necessarily define themselves as such, and they must be counted in, otherwise ecofeminism remains a white western movement. The ecological disaster we are experiencing is extremely linked to the colonial context and forgetting that, and pretending that ecofeminism is a white women's movement, tends to erase one of the real problems of the ecological disaster that is colonization. There have been ecofeminists in Latin America, in India, in Africa, in Asia... there are plenty of places in the world where women have mobilized by making the links between the destruction of life and the oppression of women... because they were peasants, farmers, mothers, because they had a domestic role to play. To show this is to adopt a decolonial vision of ecofeminism.

There are also ecofeminist currents that have revived a feminine and/or feminist spirituality, ecofeminist movements that have questioned the question of animal consumption, the binarity between men and women or the relationship to science, and others that have adopted a more materialistic perspective. Ecofeminism is first and foremost a women's struggle: there is no manifesto, it is not a book... these are women who, in different parts of the world, have begun to question their gender identity and the destruction of nature and living things. The general underlying idea is that patriarchy could not exist without exploiting women and the land, and from there, it is open to everything. Ecofeminists have also invented new ways of doing activism, more artistic, more physical, they have created sanctuaries. Ecofeminism is a place of creation, and we have to be careful about the recuperation of this movement by big capital. Because ecofeminism is a revolution.

3. We then talk about the place of women and the reproduction of dominations in militant ecological spaces [41:59 ► 1H11]

This reproduction of domination takes several forms: a poor distribution of speech, a virile approach to activism and a certain macho heroism, or a disdain for emotions, vulnerability and community care. Above all, environmental activist spaces are often characterized by a poor reception of criticism (whether queer, anti-racist or feminist) when it is formulated. This is linked to an implicit hierarchization of struggles, i.e., the idea that the ecological struggle is only about "saving nature". It is also linked to an inability to recognize both the very existence of dominations and the fact that our viewpoint changes according to our place in society, our identities and our privileges. It is rather rare to see environmental groups engaging in collective processes of privilege and identities deconstruction.

This prioritization of struggles is also linked to a lack of understanding of what the problem of climate change is. Climate change is not a technical problem, it is not a problem of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. If we start from the premise that climate change is a fundamentally social and human problem, and that it can only be only understood and fought against by taking into account its structural drivers (which are capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism, etc.), we also understand better why it is really urgent to break away from the power relations in activist spaces. Because it raises the thorny issue to know how inequalities in society can really be tackled if we allow them in activist spaces, how we can really shut down a capitalist, patriarchal, racist system if we reproduce some of its worst practices at our small level... because it is a whole political reading that is at stake.

But how do you do it? It is necessary for us to create spaces not open to all between women, but also between racialized people or queer people (because sometimes we can feel closer to a person who has been socialized similarly from a racial point of view but differently from a gender point of view). As women, we do not necessarily have the same experience: the dimension of race can be very decisive and structuring. Spaces which are not open to all allows us to create spaces without doing pedagogy and to co-create things by having situated our identity. It also favours free speech, and it sometimes help to realize that some experiences we live are, in fact, injustices: if these spaces allow a verbalization of oppression, they especially allow the creation of solutions between the people who take part to them, because they are freed from all this pedagogical work to people who are in dominant positions in society and who have to be faced everyday (this pedagogical work can be very tiring on a daily basis). Women-only spaces bring this creative force and makes it possible to create subversive things. Mixed-gender spaces are not a good place to start, especially if women do not want to take on the responsibility of organising the group in the least discriminatory way possible. We therefore advice to try to be part in women-only (or queer only, or BIPOC only) spaces as much as possible.

The criticism that is often levelled at these groups - which is, moreover, often a criticism of men (or white people towards anti-racist collectives) - is the risk of communitarianism or separatism. But it means forgetting that we are in constant exchange with others. Moreover, separatism is a form of political mobilization in its own right. Another criticism is that they would not bring societal change, but perhaps their multiplication can bring about societal change. Moreover, many women-only groups are not intended to remain so: these circles can sometimes also help mixed-gender groups facing a range of problems related to the reproduction of oppressions, to define what might be solutions to avoid reproducing them. With this in mind, one of the first steps in countering the reproduction of domination in mixed-gender activist spaces is to first recognize that this is a problem that requires a collective response. However, it must also be recognized that only those who identify as women can define their needs, even though it is recognized that it is difficult to speak of a "women's" category because of the diversity of experiences, given the intersection of multiple oppressions. Thus, different forms of collective responses can be brought about, such as the establishment of mechanisms to ensure a better division of speech or tasks.

4. And we end with recommendations [1h11 ► 1h16]

-  The comic strips [Grandeur et décadence](#) (by Liv Strömquist) and [On a Sunbeam](#) (by Tillie Walden)
-  The books [Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre](#) (by Bell Hooks) and [An Apartment on Uranus: Chronicles of the Crossing](#) (by Paul B. Preciado)
-  The documentary ["Ni les femmes, ni la Terre"](#) (by Marine Allard, Lucie Assemat & Coline Dhaussy)