

New Girl Order: Female Bodies And Activism

Modern feminist protesters are using their body in new and shocking ways to achieve social change. But does this tactic alienate the very demographic they are fighting for?

“Have fun scrubbing that shit off your body silly bitch” was a model’s eloquent reaction to FEMEN protesters storming a Paris catwalk in order to highlight model exploitation and fashion ‘dictaterror’. Her attitude echoes the predominant view of the American public, who, according to a recent University of Toronto study, regard feminist activists as ‘unhygienic’, amongst other less-than-flattering attributes. FEMEN, a Ukrainian organization that has gained worldwide notoriety by displaying their slogans on the bared torsos of young women, is running into one of the basic paradoxes of modern activism: by trying to be particularly shocking they may alienate rather than win over the public. But FEMEN are not the first to use the female body as a political weapon in the struggle for social change.

The earliest example can be traced back to antiquity. ‘Lysistrata’, a comedy written by Aristophanes, detailed Greek women’s conspiracy to end the Peloponnesian war by withholding sex from their husbands until they negotiated a peace agreement. In reality, women took much longer to achieve political clout, and even suffragettes of the early 20th century would have been appalled to use such tactics. It was only during the second wave of feminism in the 1960s that the female body became a tool for activism.

Particularly after WWII, in which women actively contributed to the war effort, women were no longer content to merely ‘be looked at’. The affront over outdated gender roles sparked female performance art. Its early stages focused on promoting the ‘sacral implications of the body’. In her Eye Body project, performance and conceptual artist Carolee Schneeman used her body as one of the materials. The following two decades, however, saw the feminine body as a sacral sight replaced by the ‘scatological, aggressive and pornographic’, which tied in with the increasing need for an active female self-image. On this new stage, feminist artists like Karen Finley and Annie Sprinkle took it upon themselves to de-eroticize the body into the political. One specific performance for Sprinkle’s Prometheus Project involved a show-and-tell in which she invited male volunteers to touch her body parts and describe the sensations and sights. By watching the audience and interviewing them on her body parts, she disassociated the action from its own sexual possibilities, rendering it clinical and ‘anti-porn’.

In the new millennium, sex strikes in the style of ‘Lysistrata’ became a valid tool. In 2003, this was one of the non-violent methods with which the Women of Liberia Mass Action For Peace managed to end the second Liberian civil war. La Huelga de Las Piernas Cruzada (“the strike of crossed legs”) in Colombia, 2006, was an initiative run by wives and girlfriends of gang members to force their men to turn in their weapons and end the increasingly bloody gang warfare. In 2012, a Togo opposition coalition called for a sex boycott to force President Gnassingbe to resign, so far unsuccessfully.

In the West, the most well-known examples of female activism are FEMEN (Ukraine) and Pussy Riot (Russia). Despite similar goals, they use the female body in vastly different ways.

FEMEN started out in 2008 as a protest against ‘sexpats’ and sex tourism. In the beginning, they dressed in provocative clothes, but these became scantier as they realised that, in the words of prominent FEMEN activist Inna Shevchenko: “we know what the media need – sex, scandals and fighting – and that’s what we give them”. When they first went topless, they wrote their slogans on their backs, but soon found out that photographers were more interested in their breasts. Next time they protested, their slogans were placed where they would gain maximum attention. So far, they have protested against legalisation of prostitution, the Russian Orthodox church and its links to Putin, what they refer to as the ‘Gazprom-Kremlin’ dictatorship, and all kinds of organised religions

that interfere with human rights. In 2012, they chainsawed a crucifix in Kyiv (Kiev) to protest the imprisonment of a newly-emerged activist group, Pussy Riot.

Pussy Riot is a punk performance group founded in Moscow, 2011. Consisting roughly of eleven women, their method of protest involves guerilla performances in public places, which are filmed and distributed over the Internet. The perceived dictatorship of President Vladimir Putin, LGBT rights, and the problematic role of the Orthodox church form the core of their lyrics. Concealing their faces with balaclavas and often swapping nicknames in a further attempt to distance themselves from their individual identities, their message to the public is that “everyone can be Pussy Riot. We just show people what the people can do”. Their most famous performance was a protest against the re-election of Vladimir Putin in 2012. Wearing their balaclavas in a cathedral, they sang a ‘punk prayer’ called ‘Mother of God, Drive Putin Away’. It was this protest that got three members of Pussy Riot imprisoned for ‘premeditated hooliganism performed by an organised group of people, motivated by religious hatred’.

Pussy Riot’s actions garnered little sympathy among the Russian people, who saw their actions as a breach of religious peace. Internationally, Pussy Riot received massive support, with artists and politicians clamouring to condemn their sentence. For FEMEN the situation is similar, as they receive far more support internationally than they do domestically.

However, it was FEMEN’s protest against Muslim ‘patriarchy’ that drew attention to their shortcomings as representatives of women worldwide. After staging topless protests in support of the persecuted Tunisian activist Amina Tyler in front of various mosques with slogans such as ‘F*ck your morals’ and ‘Muslim women, let’s get naked’, Muslim women responded with an online campaign stating ‘I can support women’s rights with my clothes on’ and ‘nudity does not liberate me and I do not need saving’. There are two reasons why FEMEN’s ‘topless Jihad’ backfired terribly. The first lay in their ‘pervading and deep-rooted ignorance’ of Islam. Shevchenko’s statements that “through all history of humanity, all slaves deny that they are slaves” and “they write on their posters that they don’t need liberation, but in their eyes it’s written ‘help me’” were in the eyes of many Muslim women just examples of “colonial feminist rhetoric”. The second criticism was that FEMEN activists, picked out for their external attributes, did not represent Muslim women in any shape or form.

Neither does it help FEMEN’s cause that it was once led by a man, the political scientist Victor Svyatski. According to Australian film-maker Kitty Green, who recently released a documentary on the group, Svyatski’s leadership style was hardly feminist: “He hand-picked the prettiest girls because the prettiest girls sell more papers. [...] He was quite horrible with the girls. He would scream at them and call them b*tches.” In an interview with Ms Green, Mr Svyatski voiced a deeply misogynist opinion of the female members of FEMEN, whom he called “weak” and ridden with “submissiveness, spinelessness, lack of punctuality.” This is in contrast to Pussy Riot, who has always been a female-only organization. When the husband of one of their activists, Pyotr Verzilov, styled himself as the “frontman” of the group, this claim was met with uni-vocal criticism, especially by his own wife.

Another difference lies in their attitude towards commercialism. Pussy Riot has insofar resisted all commercialization of their ‘brand’ and censured their former lawyer Mark Feigin for attempting to register the trademark. They even distanced themselves from celebrity supporters like Madonna and Björk and stated that they “refused to perform as part of the capitalist system”.

FEMEN, in contrast, have no problems financing themselves by selling T-shirts, caps and other merchandise, or receiving royalties from foreign interviews. Private donations have also kept them afloat. Furthermore, there are media allegations that activists and protesters receive a (for Ukrainian standards) high salary.

FEMEN and Pussy Riot represent two opposite poles: one uses the stereotypes of modern female representations in the media – attractive naked bodies – while the others use their image in a raw,

abrasive manner – styling their faces as a battlefield with their military-style balaclavas, and wearing bright contrasting colours. While both challenge classical feminism in their own provocative way, one should keep in mind that there are many faces and concepts of feminism: every group's attempt to declare their own interpretation as the authoritative truth will inevitably lead to backlash, as can be seen in the controversy between FEMEN and Muslim women. Every woman must decide for herself what her body means to her, and whether or how she wants to use it to make a statement. And this ability to make the choice is, perhaps, what feminism is truly about.