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We Came! We Stripped! We Conquered! The Sextremist Feminists of FEMEN in Ukrainian Historical Context and Contemporary Controversy

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WE CAME! WE STRIPPED! WE CONQUERED?

THE SEXTREMIST FEMINISTS OF FEMEN IN UKRAINIAN HISTORICAL
CONTEXT AND CONTEMPORARY CONTROVERSY

by

Jayeon Kim

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program

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Background

In 2008, Anna Hutsol, an economist by training, founded feminist organization FEMEN (Megginson 2011). Comprised mostly of other university-educated women, FEMEN has received international media coverage, encountered controversy, and received death threats for their topless protests. For their activism, French magazine *Madame Figaro* ranked one of the founding members Inna Shevchenko on the 13th position in their list of Women of the Year (Madame Figaro 2012). They have delivered lectures on their movement at such international forums and universities. FEMEN now has chapters in Brazil, Tunisia, France, and Germany. FEMEN activists attribute their visibility that they have received to “sextremism,” their tactic of using the shock generated by their naked bodies to draw attention to their messages. They say that sextremism provides the advantage of maintaining non-violence in their ideals while at the same time generating the greatest possible shock.

FEMEN protesters have stripped in circumstances that jeopardize their safety in order to promote every cause that they find worthy. They have braved the winter weather in Davos, Switzerland and in the Vatican. In Paris, they staged a protest to support legalization of gay marriage, and stormed cathedrals to protest the role that the Catholic Church played in delaying the measure. They travelled to Belarus, “the last dictatorship in Europe,” to express their disapproval toward President Aleksandr Lukashenko. They have appeared prominently in Ukraine and Poland to protest the prevalence of sex trafficking in these two countries that co-hosted Euro 2012. In these various issues, FEMEN protesters see a connection between various structures of corruption and injustice that perpetuate inequality for their fellow women in Ukraine.

These activists say that Ukrainian women have only their bodies as their means of visibility due to societal injustice that reduced them to their beauty and to their role of providing sexual satisfaction to men. FEMEN protesters point out that Ukrainian women have become international commodities in

the sex industry and as mail order brides. By appearing topless, the women of FEMEN aim to direct media attention to their messages, which they paint on their bare breasts. From a country in which many of their fellow women become sexual commodities, the activists claim that their topless protests exploit the patriarchal structures that have reduced them to objects for the male gaze and desire. They find freedom in using their nudity for political causes in that they strip to promote their own interests and not those of men.

The media attention that they generate through their topless protests also affords them the “best protection” in a politically corrupt country with little civil society (Girard 2012). They have taken advantage of various occasions that allow them visibility. Outside Ukraine, the English-speaking FEMEN members, Inna and Alexandra Shevchenko, speak at such various events, lectures, forums, and documentaries. They have posed for photographers, and appeared in fashion editorials, with and without clothing. Domestically, members have engaged in heated debates on Ukrainian news programs. They appear against critical male politicians, who accuse them of promoting sex tourism in Ukraine with their topless protests.

In Ukraine, the status of women has remained low since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Political representation of women has sharply fallen. Over half of married women work as housewives and those who choose to work experience wage inequality and sexism at their workplace. In a country where “feminism never existed before in any form,” FEMEN claims that it is bringing the new wave of feminism to elevate the status of women (Steirischerherbst 2012). They fight for their rights with their bare breasts, the only remaining weapons of Ukrainian women. In response to their topless protests, Ukrainians and even other feminists have together attacked FEMEN.

In this paper, I seek to study this emerging feminist movement from a theoretical framework of feminist sociology and Ukrainian history. To contextualize the reasons for which FEMEN activists protest,

I examine the history of Ukrainian women from various feminist perspectives. My study is an interdisciplinary study that is both sociological and cultural/historical. I perform a visual analysis of FEMEN's protests in order to understand their aims from multiple perspectives. I contextualized their movement by examining the history of Ukrainian women and feminism in Ukraine through both historical and journalistic accounts. I compare FEMEN's use of nudity with other social movements and feminist artists' usage of nudity to challenge sexual objectification of women. My data are photographic images and video footage of their protests, texts from their critics, and FEMEN's original documents that contain their arguments and other discourses. The videos, images, news sources, and other discourses are in English, Russian, and Ukrainian.

FEMEN's approach shows significant understanding of the gender inequality and the lack of civil society that characterize Ukraine. While the number of non-governmental organizations has grown since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the government continues to resist and interfere with their activities. Due to the lack of civil society, many other social movements in Ukraine have struggled to gain attention – except that of the police – with the traditional approach of mass gatherings with posters. FEMEN has shown considerable creativity in approaching their appearances as a form of theater. They appear with such slogans painted on their breasts and on their posters, such as “In Gay We Trust,” against Catholic anti-gay protesters in Paris. While topless, they perform their protests with costumes that they have designed and routines that they have choreographed.

As actors, they appear with nationally recognized symbols of the Ukrainian women. On their head are *vinok*, flower sheaths that comprise a part of the traditional Ukrainian dress. The *vinok* evokes the image of the traditionally feminine Ukrainian woman while their bare breasts in public bring the image of a whore. Appearing as the sexualized version of the traditional, subservient Ukrainian women, they turn the “virgin” Ukrainian woman into a “whore,” the underbelly of the Ukrainian society that has

commodified women. They reappropriate the roles of women in Ukraine to present taboo issue of the sex industry into the public. Their topless protests show references to various elements unique to Ukrainian society.

For their sextremism, FEMEN protesters encountered scrutiny from women, with whom they claim a common cause: feminists. The self-identified sextremists claim that their approach replaces obsolete schools of “classical feminism,” their umbrella term for Western feminist movements. As FEMEN protests attract more attention, questions surround the efficacy of their activism. Western feminists have criticized FEMEN members for reinforcing the male gaze upon female bodies. Russian gender researcher Dmitrieva called FEMEN activists “extreme exhibitionists,” who she compared to models in PETA advertisements, which feature prominent women in semi-nude advertisements against animal cruelty (Dmitrieva 2012). Feminists accused FEMEN of sexually objectifying themselves to draw media attention, perpetuating the male gaze on women’s bodies.

While FEMEN members better understand the situation of fellow Ukrainian women, they have failed to account for intersectionality. In Arab and Muslim women abroad, FEMEN activists see victimhood and erase their agency. Activists see oppression in traditional Islamic attires. They have regularly appeared with posters and slogans on their breasts that read “Nudity is freedom,” “Saudi Arabia take off your clothes!” and “Muslim women, let’s get naked” (Nagarajan 2013, Wilsher 2012, Tayler 2013a). Inna Shevchenko believes that any woman can find freedom from oppressive structures by protesting topless. For equating nudity with liberation of women, activists have received criticism from Islamic feminists for repeating the mistakes of Western feminists and discrediting their culture and faith.

FEMEN activists assume a similar attitude toward sex workers. FEMEN’s view conflicts with that of other feminists, who believe that men and women can enjoy positive experiences as sex workers.

Alexandra Shevchenko believes that there are no such women who participate in prostitution by their own will and enjoy their work. Shevchenko opposes legalization of prostitution and favors criminalization of clients (Manyueko 2013).

FEMEN members say that they would appear anywhere to promote their movement and cause. I will attempt to replicate the approach of FEMEN by striving to compile a comprehensive range of sources for my research. Most of the sources come from interviews that the English-speaking members have done in the media. They are in Russian and in English. They include television appearances in countries, such as Ukraine, Russia, and France and video footages of their protests. They have also appeared in magazine editorials and posed for professional photographers. The research involved heavy usage of sources from social media, such as Vimeo, Twitter, and LiveJournal. Since losing their LiveJournal account in 2012, they have launched their own website, femen.org.

My study of FEMEN examines the movement from several perspectives and places its rise in various contexts. Theories that I have examined come from post-modernism, visual sociology, and various schools of feminism. As FEMEN members have spoken of their homeland as having “no history of feminism,” I consider the history of feminism, the status of women in Ukraine, and factors that make social change difficult. I pay particular attention to the relationship between the emerging civil society and state resistance. As a researcher in sociology, I draw the connection between individual and structure. Using their interviews that FEMEN activists have given to the media and to me, I have considered the biographies of individual members and their decision to launch the movement.

The History of Women and Feminism in Ukraine, Past and Present

Women's Movements in Pre-revolutionary Ukraine

FEMEN members have cited the historical weakness of civil society, marginalization of women, and absence of feminism in Ukraine as motives behind their topless protests. Contrary to their claim, feminism existed since pre-revolutionary Ukraine, although the movement has not developed to the same scale as it has in Western countries.

Exploring the history of women and feminism entails understanding the regional differences within the country. With Poland to its west and Russia to its east, Ukrainian borders have consistently shifted, as parts of present-day Ukraine became those of their neighboring countries. At one point, the country had ceased to exist. Different names of various Ukrainian cities attest to the fluidity of its borders. The Western city of Lviv has names in Polish, Ukrainian, and Russian.

Since the years of Kievan Rus from 882 to 1283, Ukrainian women enjoyed considerably more autonomy than their Russian counterparts. During this time, women had considerable choice in choosing their husbands and freedom to initiate in courtship (Rubchak 1996:321). No marriage could take place without the woman's consent. Meanwhile in Russia, *domostroi*, a set of household rules, severely restricted Russian women's rights (Rubchak 1996:322). According to the laws, husbands could beat their wives to correct their disobedience. There was another custom of *terem*, an upper class practice of secluding women into separate quarters (Rubchak 1996:322). Neither practice existed in Ukraine, where women lived in matrilineal societies and enjoyed considerable influence. Ukrainian women's status declined when Russia acquired eastern Ukraine into its territories in the 17th century,

and eventually all of present-day Ukraine. However, their status remained higher than that of Russian women. Such conditions for Ukrainian women allowed feminism to emerge in their country.

The first feminists in Ukraine emerged in the 1880s. In 1887, Nataliia Kobrynska and Olena Pchilka published a feminist anthology *Pershyi Vinok* (The First Garland). For their publication, the two women chose works of only women writers, with the goal of raising the social and political consciousness of Ukrainian women (Koscharsky 2003:309). Another prominent feminist was poet and writer Lesia Ukrainika (1871-1913), who wrote a feminist almanac (Pavlychko 1996:308). In all her works, she wrote only in Ukrainian to resist the Russian influence in her country. These feminists involved themselves in not only feminism, but also of feminism.

Nationalism and feminism took place concurrently in Ukraine, but did not overlap. Nationalism sought to promote national sovereignty, while the other addressed gender inequality within Ukraine. Feminism was not merely a few women, but emerged as an organized movement in Ukraine, especially among Ukrainian circles. Since the emergence of the women's movement, many prominent women had refused to identify themselves as feminists. Many of their organizations focused on community development instead of emphasizing female exclusivity. Living as stateless people, women felt the urgency of uplifting their community at large.

“The Woman Question” during the Soviet Union

As the Russian Empire transformed into the Soviet Union, Ukraine became Ukrainian SSR in 1919. As Ukraine became a part of the Soviet Union, Ukraine lost its right to sovereignty once again. Communists claimed oppression of women in imperial Russia as a pretext for communism. While feminist movements crossed over to Ukraine from the West, they were soon discouraged. The central

authorities considered feminism a Western bourgeois movement. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukrainians would remember women's rights as a Soviet effort to remove Ukrainian traditions.

The Soviet Union refused to acknowledge all forms of differences across gender and ethnicity, which were many. Communism comprised the only solution to any forms of inequality. At first, it had attempted to remove gender differences and abolish the family, which Communists saw as an oppressive institution. Soviet feminist Alexandra Kollontai advocated free love. She envisioned such relationships as a means to free women from their husbands. Eventually, a communist society would answer women's needs, such as childcare and money, and render the institution of marriage obsolete (Goldman 1993:11).

To address the "woman question," the Central Committee of the Communist Party established *Zhenotdel* in 1919. *Zhenotdel* introduced measures to guarantee formal equality. By law, women had to comprise at least one third representation in legislative bodies and one half of the local Soviets. At the same time, the second shift for women continued. *Zhenotdel* was abolished in 1930 when Stalin proclaimed that problems of gender inequality had been solved. He believed that the Soviet government adequately represented the interest of women, as it did for other citizens. The abolishment of *Zhenotdel* represented the end of the women's question. While feminism did not exist by name, there were many prominent women celebrated as heroes of communism.

Soviet efforts to address the "woman question" took place concurrently with state suppression of Ukrainian nationalism. Repressions reached its peak during the 1930s. Millions of Ukrainians perished as a result of Holodomor from 1932 – 1933, a man-made famine that took place in Ukraine. More Ukrainians perished during the Great Purge that began in the late 1930s. Ukrainian nationalists and intellectuals became victims of the Great Purge when Joseph Stalin killed anyone he found politically questionable.

After Joseph Stalin's rise to power, more efforts toward gender differentiation took place. During the Soviet Union, women had dual obligations of child rearing and performing labor to support the economy of their state. In his 1923 speech on International Women's Day, General Secretary Joseph Stalin praised women as the "builders of socialist industry, collective farming, [and] socialist culture" and motherhood as an "honorable social duty" to the Soviet Union (Stalin 1950). . In 1944, Presidium of the Supreme Soviet established an honorary title of Mother Heroine. Women with 10 or more children received honorary titles of Mother Heroine (). Few women sought and received this title. Of course, this changed with urbanization and the resulting housing shortage in the cities. As more people wanted to live in the cities than the houses available, the birth rate declined with time. The Soviet Union formally recognized women for their roles as wives and mothers, but the economic, political, and social reality made these obligations difficult to realize.

During the war, participation of women in the labor force increased. After the War, the Government expected women to return to their traditional roles as wife and mother. Soviet magazines and newspapers describe the war years as a period when women repressed their feminine inclinations for the sake of the war. Soviet women's magazines promoted the image of the Soviet superwoman, whose life has reached perfection through socialism. The woman question existed in the early Soviet period when communist leaders sought to free them from the burden of capitalism.

The post-war return to tradition continued. In 1957, Nikita Khrushchev and Richard Nixon engaged in a spontaneous debate, later known as the Kitchen debate. Using the kitchen as a metaphor for the superiority of their respective countries, the General Secretary and the Vice President of the United States argued whose women worked in the better kitchen. The discussion showed that both leaders, who both proclaimed that their respective world was a better place for women, considered domestic work women's work (Goldman 1993:316).

Politically, women received guarantees of representation. Quotas guaranteed them 50% of seats in the local Soviet and 30% of seats in the Supreme Soviet, the legislative body of each Soviet republic. Labor protections existed as well, despite women's interests. Laws forbade women from participating in heavy industries and taking night shifts. However, the burden of raising children often prompted women to do otherwise (Filtzer 1996:214). Like men, women bore the obligation to work outside their homes to support the economy of their country. However, the responsibility to raise children and maintain their homes belonged to women alone.

By the 1970s, people were already questioning the communist vision of gender inequality. Newspapers printed letters from men, who criticized mothers for neglecting their children (Bridger 1996:244). Such letters blamed social ills on the masculinization of women. By *glasnost* in the 1980s, which allowed greater media freedom, journalists acknowledged various forms of gender inequality.

Women had long participated in prostitution (Pilkington 1996:176). Soviet women had a 90% employment rate and at the same time, held occupations in lower positions and received little pay. Many took low-paying jobs that men found undesirable (Vijayarasa 2012:55). To accommodate the double burden of work and childcare, women violated many of the protections that barred women from certain occupations, including work at mines and night shifts. It had become clear that women's rights existed symbolically. Women were expected to work for the country and raise children and maintain homes for their families.

In the 1980s, resistance toward the Soviet government emerged in the republics of the Soviet Union and satellite states in the Warsaw Pact. In 1989, Ukrainian SSR joined other Soviet republics in declaring its native language their only language. On October 28, the Supreme Soviet of Ukrainian SSR adopted the Law of Languages, and declared Ukrainian the only state language (Verkhovna Rada 1989).

As a result of Gorbachev's glasnost that allowed greater freedom of speech and political expression, the role of the Soviet women also came into question.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly independent Ukrainian government attempted to reduce the Soviet women into the imaginary pre-revolutionary Ukrainian women. Feminism continued to be considered a foreign import and had a negative image in Ukraine. Ukrainians remembered efforts toward gender equality as a Soviet pursuit that also suppressed their national identity. Top-down communist efforts to address the woman question created stigma surrounding feminism and took away the venue where women could organize to improve their status as women. Thus, many Ukrainian women refused to identify as feminists, including top-level women politicians (Rubchak 2012:56). Decades of Soviet rule had allowed no presence of feminism in the memories of Ukrainians.

Berehynia and the Barbie: The Ukrainization of Post-Soviet Ukrainian Woman

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine re-emerged as an independent state. The erosion of linguistic and cultural barriers between Russia and Ukraine made state building a challenging process for Ukrainians. Regional, cultural, and linguistic differences existed among Ukrainians as well: while Western Ukrainians identified more closely with Ukrainian nationalism and spoke Ukrainian, Ukrainians and ethnic Russians from the industrialized east and south identified more closely with Russian culture and preferred the Russian language. This diversity entailed changes in several aspects of Ukrainian society.

Since independence, the Ukrainian government introduced several measures with the aim of Ukrainizing language and culture. In 1996, members of national parliament Verkhovna Rada voted to

change the guidelines for Romanization of Ukrainian geographic names. The new system reflected transliteration of the Ukrainian alphabet, instead of Russian (Matiaszek 1996). Capital of Ukraine Kiev became Kyiv. Hotel Moskva, located in the center of the capital, was renamed Hotel Ukraina. Kyiv's city square October Revolution Square was renamed Maidan Nezalezhnosti, or Independence Square. Growing number of schools and universities adopted Ukrainian language as the primary language of instruction (Malinkovich 2005). In 2004, the Ukrainian parliament Verkhovna Rada passed a bill that barred Russian language television programs without Ukrainian subtitles or translations (Krushelnicky 2004). Ukrainization took place within the daily lives of women as well. Upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukrainians rejected the masculinized image of Soviet women, who bore the double burden of the working woman and the mother.

Feminist literature has noted and criticized the relationship between gender ideology and nationalism. Anne McClintock argues, "All nationalisms are gendered, all are invented, and all are dangerous" (McClintock 1993:61). To support her argument, she cites Ernest Geller and Benedict Anderson, who note that nationalism "invents nations where they do not exist" and appeals to an "august and immemorial past" to give legitimacy to their existence, despite that most nations have emerged only recently (Gellner 1964 and Anderson 1991:6). As nationalists reconstruct the history of the nation, nationalists often advocate past ideals. Imaginations of traditional gender roles constitute one of them.

Nationalist myths depend heavily on construction of gender. Often, they do so with traditional inclinations. As population growth of the country comprises one of nationalists' interests, women become mothers, while men become the breadwinners for their families and defenders of their countries (Zhurzhenko 2001:1). McClintock argues that this sharply gendered division of labor creates a stronger need for unity as a nation. Using the analogy of the nation as a home, nationalists seek to

create a state that fosters cohesion through mutual reliance between men and women. This framework places women in a passive position and in their homes, where they must stay with the history they are required to cherish.

Another explanation, more specific to the history of Ukraine, suggests that Ukrainian women have historically put aside their question of women's liberation to advocate for independence of their nation. While they participated in civil society, they did so to promote Ukrainian sovereignty, not to question their roles as women. Due to the urgency of independence, Ukrainian women considered feminism a movement of secondary importance. Like during the 19th century, the question of independence and women's rights arose concurrently after the collapse, but one became more important than the other. Both feminist criticism of nationalism and historical account of Ukrainian women's activism indicate that women should view their own interests and national interests as mutually exclusive.

The feminist perspective on nationalism explains the sharp changes in the conditions of Ukrainian women after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the forces that have resulted in them. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukrainian nationalism re-emerged. To promote the process of state-building of a newly independent nation, nationalists reconstructed the myth of *Berehynia*, the "hearth mother." *Berehynia*, originally a female spirit in Slavic pagan mythology, returned to independent Ukraine to promote the myth of Ukrainian matriarchy. The hearth, traditionally a burial site, conveys generational continuity and evokes agricultural origins of Ukraine (Rubchak 1996:318). Simultaneously as "a hearth mother, an earth goddess, and a domestic Madonna," *Berehynia* tends to the needs of her children and maintains their homes (Phillips 2008:50). As the embodiment of true Ukrainian identity free of corrupting Soviet influences, she represents the protector of the Ukrainian

language and culture. This model of femininity gives an empowering illusion by casting the Ukrainian woman as the matriarch of her country.

Berehynia is the state-sanctioned symbol of independent Ukraine and contemporary Ukrainian womanhood. The current appearance of Maidan Nezalezhnosti presents an example of state efforts to legitimize the recent invention of *Berehynia*. In 2001, Mayor of Kyiv Oleksandr Omelchenko ordered renovation of Maidan Nezalezhnosti, the central square of the Ukrainian capital. The reconstruction unveiled a monument of *Berehynia*, standing on top of a 60m tall dome (Phillips 2008:51). In the very center of Maidan, she raises her arms to the heavens. To the passersby, her flowing sleeves create the illusion of wings. As Ukraine's divine feminine, she watches over the people of Kyiv.



Figure 1 A statue of *Berehynia* has stood at the center of Kyiv's Maidan Nezalezhnosti since 2001.

Male politicians and everyday women alike consider *Berehynia* an ideal model of Ukrainian femininity. In her, male politicians see a traditional woman who they approve, while women see themselves as matriarchs, who wielded influence during more egalitarian times. The myth of Ukrainian matriarchal culture validates complimentary gender roles and the notion of "equality in difference" (Zhurzhenko 2009:4). The present-day interpretation of *Berehynia* creates a false historical precedent for Ukrainian women's roles as wives and mothers. Nationalist portrayal of *Berehynia* erases women's legacy of participation in social movements and intellectual discourse during pre-revolutionary Ukraine. This role model stands to remind women that their



Figure 2 *Berehynia* is Ukraine's divine feminine.

sphere of significance is their homes, where they raise and nurture their children. The societal expectation to emulate Berehynia in their daily lives excludes modern Ukrainian women from institutions of power, such as politics and work.

In addition to Berehynia, the Barbie serves as another image of Ukrainian women. Ukrainian feminist Oksana Kis notes that the Barbie has emerged from Ukrainian nationalism and consumer culture, neither of which openly existed during the Soviet years. The Barbie refers to women, who strive for visibility through their beauty and material luxury (Kis 2007:34). While unrecognized by the state, the model of the Barbie represents expectations that women face in their daily lives. It embodies their trajectory of attracting men's attention with their beauty, marrying early, and raising children. This model reinforces women's reliance on men for sustaining their lives.

The two images of Berehynia and the Barbie emphasize the importance of women's beauty and service to men. Revival of Ukrainian national identity has led to rejection of the masculinized image of the Soviet woman. Performing Ukrainian citizenship for women means fulfillment of the roles of the wife and mother. The traditional Ukrainian woman renounces her position that she had at work and returns home (Rubchak 2012:55). The return home represents fulfillment of womanhood and life according to feminine inclinations. Ukrainian women's return to their homes represents rejection of Communist values that had repressed Ukrainian womanhood (Rubchak 2012:56). However, women's lives differ sharply from the images that politicians present. While they have indeed returned to their homes, they did so as a response to few opportunities that contemporary Ukraine offered for women. Economic difficulties after the collapse of the Soviet Union worsened women's conditions.

Privatization, hyperinflation, and other economic problems after the collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in loss of economic opportunities, especially for women. Feminization of unemployment and poverty took place (Vijayarasa 2012:55). Because of limited economic opportunities, women

entered prostitution. This shadow industry emerged, offering Ukrainian women unpleasant alternatives. After the collapse, many of the jobs were in the newly emerging privatized, criminal businesses of the shadow economy. By 1995, this shadow economy accounted for 50 percent of the GDP (Hughes 2000:4). It included criminal networks that expanded after the collapse that fostered sexual trafficking for profit.

The image of Ukrainian women as Barbies persists in this industry in which they have become commodities. With few skills and little recognition in the mainstream economy, Ukrainian women have turned to offering sexual services. Donna Hughes, who has studied the sex industry in Eastern Europe, calls sexual trafficking in Eastern Europe “the ‘Natasha’ trade” (Hughes 2001:10). “Natasha,” a common Eastern European name, refers to nicknames that refer to Eastern European sex workers who work in neighboring countries, such as Israel and Turkey (Hughes 2000:3). The late Soviet policy that allowed greater freedom in migration and trade also enabled and nurtured criminal networks. Additionally, developing economy of Ukraine created favorable conditions for sex tourists from abroad. Tourists from the European Union and the United States can enter the country without a visa. Cheap flights and hotels made Ukraine an affordable destination. The affluence of these foreign clients made prostitution a much more lucrative choice for Ukrainian women, receiving little pay at work. Many women turned to prostitution to support their parents and children.

Various statistics attest to the prevalence of prostitution in Ukraine. The Ukrainian Interior Ministry provides an estimate of 12,000 sex workers in Ukraine, while the Kiev International Institute of Sociology found that one in every eight of prostitutes is a university or high school student (Eichhofer 2009). In 2012, other estimates found that 50,000 Ukrainian women worked as prostitutes, one in six of whom was a minor (UNIAN 2012; Gazeta.ua 2012). Abroad, even more participate in human trafficking: over 100,000 Ukrainian women are trafficked to over 55 countries.

The number of Ukrainian women in the sex industry contrasts with women in the mainstream economy. A little over half of women participate in the economy (Grushenko 2010). As of 2012, Ukrainian women earn 61% of the income that men earn for performing similar work (WEF 2012). Years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the economic situation of women has improved little. As a result of a struggling economy, gender inequality, and little effort from the government, international marriage agencies, prostitution, and pornography have become common in Ukraine.

Ukrainian Women in Civil Society and Politics

Transition to democracy remains an incomplete process in contemporary Ukraine. Political and cultural differences remain among regions of contemporary, post-Soviet Ukraine. Economic structures vary throughout the country. Western Ukraine is agricultural and poorer while Eastern Ukraine, where Kyiv is located, is known as the industrial part and the economic center of Ukraine. Western Ukraine has traditionally represented Ukrainian culture and identity, while Eastern Ukraine, with greater proximity to Russia, received greater Russian cultural, political, and linguistic influence. Ukraine's history and diversity have made the question of national identity an elusive one to answer.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, western organizations have attempted to promote the growth of civil society in post-Soviet states. These agencies include the American governmental organization USAID (Hrycak 2007:209). Ukrainian leaders resisted Western and domestic efforts to participate in civil society. The first two Presidents Kravchuk and Kuchma directed most of Western funding toward foreign trade and investment (Hrycak 2007:209). They resisted the growth of civil society as a source of inconvenient dissidence. The tension between the state and the civil society arose on several occasions.

The number of women's organizations increased. Women's activism contributed to the growth of civil society, but not of feminism. Most women activists promoted maternalism. Instead of seeking to raise the status of women as a group, they focused on the welfare of children and families (Hrycak 2007:211). Non-governmental organizations provided a venue for women to articulate their interests. In the civil society, women are much more active and greater in numbers than they are in the male domain of politics. Women contributed greatly toward the expansion of civil society, which pushed for greater transparency in their government.

On two notable occasions, Ukrainians have protested for greater transparency in their governments. The first movement was called Ukraine without Kuchma. Beginning in 2001, the movement launched protests in reaction to the 2000 Cassette Scandal. In that scandal, voters learned that presidential candidate Leonid Kuchma had ordered the kidnapping and killing of journalist Georgiy Gongadze. Protesters demanded Kuchma's resignation. However, their movement ended unsuccessfully when the police arrested them (Hrycak 2007:209). While this attempt to end Kuchma's rule proved short-lived, the event formed an opposition movement that resurfaced in 2004.

The second movement became the 2004 Orange Revolution. Risking their lives, hundreds of thousands of protesters gathered on Maidan Nezalezhnosti to contest the unfair election of pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich, the successor to Leonid Kuchma. About 20% of Ukrainians appeared in Kyiv wearing orange, the color of their candidate Viktor Yushchenko (Hrycak 2007:209). The seventeen days of protest resulted in a recount of the elections, through which Yushchenko emerged as the rightful victor. This also resulted in the ascent of Yushchenko's ally Yulia Tymoshenko, who received the position of Prime Minister for her contribution to the Revolution. Upon successfully challenging the Presidential elections, the Orange Revolution was considered a galvanizing moment for Ukrainian civil society and a triumph for Ukrainian voters (Phillips 2008:40).

The optimism faded soon afterward. Yushchenko's party, titled Our Ukraine, quickly lost support because of conflicts within his coalition. This was also a conflict between Yushchenko and Tymoshenko. The rift allowed Yanukovich to return as President in 2010 and to level accusations that placed Tymoshenko in prison.

Despite the triumph of voters and the rise of a powerful woman, problems remain for women in politics. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, women have largely disappeared from politics. Quotas had once guaranteed women political representation. This Soviet-era measure had guaranteed women at least 50% of seats in local Soviets and 30% in the Supreme Soviet, the legislative body of Ukrainian SSR (Phillips 2008:58). In the last Supreme Soviet before the collapse, women occupied 36% of the seats (Phillips 2008:58). In the first election of independent Ukraine, the number of women in Verkhovna Rada fell sharply to 5%, and has yet to improve. At 117th in the world, Ukraine is one of the lowest ranked countries in representation of women in the parliament (WEF 2012). In 2012, 42 women comprised 9.4 percent of Verkhovna Rada, and the percentage of women politicians in Verkhovna Rada has yet to exceed 10% (WIP 2012 and OSCE 2012). The figure falls below the European equivalent at 30%.

With few women in the Parliament, women's interests unsurprisingly receive little attention from neither politicians nor the voters. Two attempts to raise women's issues failed. In 2002, two parties ran on women's platforms, but both attempts failed. Women's interests received little consideration. The two parties All-Ukrainian Political Union Women for the Future and Solidarity of Women of Ukraine attempted to gain representation in the parliament by representing women's interests. The two parties claimed to represent women's issues. However, neither bloc met the three percent threshold required for representation in the Parliament (Phillips 2008:58). Such women's issues

as equal pay, full participation in the workforce, and political representation, were not visible on the platforms of Ukrainian political parties.

The few women politicians in the Ukrainian parliament made concerted efforts to present themselves in traditionally feminine images. Among these few women, Yulia Tymoshenko assertively appropriates models of contemporary Ukrainian femininity to her political advantage. Before she made these concerted efforts to project herself as the Ukrainian matriarch, Tymoshenko faced two political disadvantages: one as a woman and another of questionable ethnic origins. Prior to her transformation



Figure 3 Yulia Tymoshenko in 2000

in the late 1990s, she received such epithets as “Iron Princess,” or “Gas Princess” for her work as the Minister of Fuel and Energy (Phillips 2008:54). As she received greater support, another question arose of her ethnicity. Her maiden name is Grigyan, usually of Armenian origins. During her presidential campaign in 2009, her opponents accused her of Jewish lineage, a historical cause for marginalization in Ukraine (Galili 2009). On speculations about her ethnicity, she responded that her father is Latvian and her mother Ukrainian (Chalupa 2008). Further political ascent entailed changing her image according to the prevailing models of Ukrainian womanhood. She overcame her disadvantage as a

woman politician by combining both the image of the Barbie and of Berehynia. The resulting image that she projects to the public differs sharply from her earlier appearance as a successful businesswoman.

Yulia Tymoshenko uses her femininity to build ties with ancient Ukrainian culture and an icon of contemporary Ukrainian nationalism. Tymoshenko dyed her naturally brown hair blonde and grew her hair long enough for her current trademark plait. Since 2000, she has addressed the public only in

Ukrainian, a language that she did not know during her youth and her years as a businesswoman (Kis 2007:40). Her nationalist platform helped her win the support of Ukrainian-speaking voters from Western Ukraine (Kis 2007:40). They now constitute the majority of her constituents. With several concerted efforts, Yulia Tymoshenko has successfully created an image of herself as the Ukrainian matriarch.



Figure 4 As a presidential candidate, Yulia Tymoshenko acknowledges her supporters at the 2009 Ukraine in Our Hearts concert tour in Zaporizhzhya.

Tymoshenko's performance of her national identity entails playing the role of the Ukrainian matriarch. While perceptions of femininity have excluded many other women them from political power, she uses her gender to evoke Berehynia to legitimize her political power. She compares herself to a mother to support the case for a woman's presence in politics. She has said, "I perceive a woman in the political realm as a mother who defends her children... Maybe at first glance she looks unprotected, but you had better not hurt her children" (Shpinkchak 2003). In one memorable moment during the Orange Revolution, she approached a militiaman to place a carnation in his shield (Phillips 2008:54), emphasizing her motherly pacifism. She cites gender differences in another occasion when she stated that women have greater political competency, because they "do politics with more soul" (Phillips 2008:54). She likens her political career to motherhood. As the matriarch of her country, she protects her children, the people of her country. She legitimizes her occupancy of a traditionally male position by repeating rhetoric of difference, not of equality. For other women, however, prevailing gender ideology serves to exclude them from politics.

The images of the Ukrainian woman as Berehynia and the Barbie persist and keep women out of male-dominated spheres of politics. These images that reduce women to their beauty and confined

them to their homes justify sexist comments from male politicians. On his cabinet having only one woman, Prime Minister Mykola Azarov said that reforms are not “women’s business” (Ryabchun 2010). On another question of whether lack of women pose any problems, he said that he experiences the difficulty of “having no one to look at during cabinet sessions,” because the ministers are “all boring faces” (Harding 2010). In 2012, Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada Volodymyr Lytvyn has said that gender relations need to return based on the “biological nature of man,” as the “the teachings of Plato” and Aristotle attest to the domination of men and women as “lower beings.” Saluting and discrediting women rely on the same rhetoric of nationalist gender ideology.

On International Women’s Day, male politicians portray the day as a celebration of gender differences. In their messages, they thank Ukrainian women for their roles as wives and mothers and celebrate gender differences. In 2008, President Viktor Yushchenko declared Ukrainian women “the most enticing, most beautiful women in the world,” whose beauty leave men “bewitched,” “devoted,” and “grateful for [their] love” (Yushchenko 2008). A year later, Volodymyr Lytvyn echoed his traditional view that “A woman’s mission is...to be the Berehynia of the family hearth” by bearing children, and praised them from their motherly love, warmth, and beauty (Rubchak 2012:6). Both congratulatory messages reaffirm post-Soviet gender ideology, which reinforces models of Ukrainian femininity as Berehynia and the Barbie. Ukrainian women receive praise for possessing qualities and performing work that Ukrainian men do not: they raise children, tend to their husbands, and look beautiful while fulfilling their duties.

Nationalism and feminism have had an especially strong relationship in Ukraine. In pre-revolutionary Ukraine, women supported the sovereignty of Ukraine and participated in the emerging civil society. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, nationalism has recast this period as a time when women performed traditional gender roles. To return to this imagined time, state policies have undone

the Soviet social, economic, and political structures that have allowed women to participate in the government and the workforce. This has resulted in the disappearance of women from the public sphere. Women lost both political representation and labor force participation.

Under the post-Soviet Ukrainian framework, living as a Ukrainian woman means performing the traditional gender roles of wife and mother. Invisible in politics and undervalued at work, Ukrainian women feel reduced to their beauty and sexuality. The mail order brides, prostitution, and pornography represent industries that commodify Ukrainian women for foreign tourists. Within their country, Alexandra Shevchenko has described sexual harassment as a reality in Ukrainian women's daily lives (YLE 2012). In her words, Ukrainian women feel the pressure to provide sexual services to receive the same treatment that they receive at work and university. At work, women have two choices of not being taken seriously, because their career is temporary before they find their husbands and have children. Another choice is providing sexual services to their superiors for greater salary and other benefits. Against their wishes, women must strip for men.

Sextremism: FEMEN's Answer to Ukraine's Woman Question

Our God is Woman: The Origins of FEMEN

The self-identified extremists of FEMEN seek to protest patriarchy and its manifestations: sexual exploitation, dictatorship, and religion (Humphrys 2013). In defending the necessity of nudity in their protests, FEMEN members cite the conditions of women in Ukraine. Founder Anna Hutsol said that her experience as a woman in Ukraine “hardened her” (Tayler 2012). If she had been born in Paris, she would have read the works of French feminist Simone de Beauvoir, instead of organizing topless protests (Tayler 2012). Instead, she lives in Ukraine, where she encountered stories of her compatriots tricked into prostitution. She and two other original members – Alexandra Shevchenko and Oksana Shachko – saw two problems for women in Ukraine: exploitation of women and no movement to address their conditions.

The three members grew up in a country, where “feminism never existed before” and their “mothers and teachers” could not tell them what it was (The Stream 2012). The three original members – Hutsol, Shevchenko, and Shachko – grew up with exposure to stereotypes about feminism. They had little knowledge of feminism, considering it a strange, foreign concept, and unaware of their marginalization. Then in 2006, Hutsol met and befriended other Khmelnytsky natives Alexandra Shevchenko and Oksana Shachko, who together “spent long evenings discussing philosophy, Marxism and the situation of women in post-Soviet society” (Neufeld 2012; Cochrane 2013). Their knowledge of feminism came from this series of discussions that they had at a café in Khmelnytsky.

With little prior knowledge of feminism, activists understood feminism through the books that they read and discussed together. Anna Hutsol considers August Bebel's 1879 *Woman under Socialism* a

particularly memorable book, which she begun reading in 2005. A German Marxist politician, he documented the history of women from the Greek civilization to a modern, industrialized society (Goldman 1993:36). In a socialist state, he believed that women will achieve full equality, and people will abandon religion by their own volition, considering it obsolete. His book shaped their consciousness and determined the issues against which FEMEN continue to protest today. After reading about Bebel's attempt to introduce an equal rights legislation to his parliament in 19th century Germany, Hutsol reflected on her experiences as a woman and those of her female friends (Neufeld 2012). She arrived to the conclusion that little has changed since the time that the book was published (Neufeld 2012). From these talks, they decided to start a feminist movement (Girard 2012).

In 2008, the three women moved to Kyiv with the aim of starting a feminist movement. Hutsol wanted to create a feminist movement, different from its predecessors. In 2009, Inna Shevchenko met the three original members through social media, and joined the group (Cochrane 2013). Before they chose topless protests as their tactic, activists appeared in pink clothing and brought with them flags, banners, and balloons (Westland 2012). With time, their tactics grew more confrontational and provocative. In March 2009, Alexandra Shevchenko threw cake at writer Oles Buzina at his book signing (Eichhofer 2009). She staged the confrontation to express disapproval at his book *Women, Back to Their Harems*, in which he claimed that women should prepare to have sex with men at any time. In the same year, they began confronting foreign men on the streets to discuss and warn against prostitution. In summer 2009, members staged another protest against Ukraine's practice of turning off hot water in the summer (Reuters 2009). In bikinis, the protesters jumped into a fountain in Maidan Nezalezhnosti, and washed their clothing.

During this time, members continued to seek ways that would direct attention to conditions of women in their country. Alexandra Shevchenko attributed the apathy to stereotypes surrounding

feminism, which Ukrainians associate with “bearded women who seek to do away with men and make love to each other” (Manyueko 2013). To achieve visibility, activists had to break these images, and show that feminists can be “sexy, feminine, and smart” at the same time (Manyueko 2013). The idea to protest topless emerged to address these gender expectations, including stereotypes about feminists.

The negative reactions that they received for their topless protests validated their tactic of sextremism. For their participation in topless protests, activists experienced pressure from expectations from their families and friends. Alexandra Shevchenko often hears her mother ask when she will have children and show their mother their grandchildren. Inna Shevchenko said that her mother fears for her own safety in their small town of Kherson, and distanced herself from her daughter for her participation in FEMEN. Oksana Shachko has also said that her mother wanted to see her daughter marry early. While Shachko lives in a small apartment in Kyiv, Shevchenko risked her well-paying job to continue her activities as a topless protester. Shevchenko said that she had a prestigious job as an aspiring journalist before she began her participation (Tayler 2013a). As a journalism student, she worked at the press office in Kyiv city hall, where she received enough to pay for her apartment without difficulty (Girard 2012).

Within their ideology is also a commitment to nonviolence, while producing as much shock as possible. While they take their actions to the streets, they do not physically resist the intervention of the police that apprehend them. Instead of confronting them, they remain in their positions and continue to scream their slogans as long as possible. “Practice is an indicator of our ideas,” says Alexandra Shevchenko. FEMEN’s tactic of topless protests comes as a response to the question, “How to be listened” as women. Members contrast their topless “actions” to “talk” and finding “ideas.” They are against “sitting at one room talking with girls.” They call this “sextremism,” or “peaceful terrorism... against our enemies” (Steirischerherbst 2012)

They sawed off crosses. Religion is the “exact picture of men’s domination.” The only “religion” should be atheism. Although they reject the dominant structures that determine the roles of their bodies, they accept the prescribed roles of religion. They do not look at the ways in which religion can be re-appropriated for women’s rights.

Like the original members, many other activists are university-educated women in their twenties. With training in economics, human resources, and art, Anna Hutsol, Alexandra Shevchenko, and Oksana Shachko have no formal background of feminism (Bidder 2011). They certainly reject approaches of “classical” feminists. Their “classical feminism” serves as an umbrella term for all feminist movements that have taken place in the West. They characterize “classical feminism” as a movement that took place only in conference halls and libraries. In their views, classical feminists limit their activism to discussion. Also, they “dress like men” in pursuit of gender equality. Inna Shevchenko considers classical feminism outdated. Classical feminism, the dominant feminist tradition of Western Europe, “doesn’t work anymore, because it is stuck in the conference halls” and “boring books and articles” that gain little exposure outside academia.

Members have described the feminist origin in their sextremism differently. Founder Anna Hutsol refused to describe her group as feminist, because of Western roots associated with the term. FEMEN incorporates various feminist ideologies to achieve its purposes. One of the most prominent ideologies concerns body politics. “When talking about women’s freedom, women’s bodies are always in the center of the question.” With fragmented history of feminism in their country, Inna and Alexandra Shevchenko consider themselves the first feminists. To acquaint people with their goals, they must “provocate [sic]” and “irritate” people, because in Ukraine, no one “listens to women” (Steirischerherbst 2012) Their use of femininity to promote their causes distinguishes them from their Western counterparts.

FEMEN activists seek to lead a movement, in which women remain in the forefront of their activism. They do not solicit support from men or NGOs even when they are occasionally arrested. They want their feminist movements to be in their control entirely. FEMEN emphasizes that the group is a voluntary movement and that the members do not receive payment for their work. Contrary from what they perceive that Western feminists do, FEMEN activists seek to portray women as a group distinct from men and to encourage them to participate in their “feminine rebellion” against a patriarchal society. Women resembling men, they believe, perpetuate male-centric norms in society and commit an act that acknowledges superiority of men. “We don’t want to deny our nature,” Alexandra Shevchenko says, because feminine movements are the only way to defeat patriarchal structures of “oligarchs, dictatorship, and religion” that oppress women. As “the new weapon of feminism,” sextremism contrasts with “impotent,” obsolete “classical feminism” of the West (Arte Creative 2012).

While they speak against classical feminism of Western Europe, FEMEN activists and Western feminists share similar goals. In fact, Alexandra Shevchenko’s calls her cake protest an ode to Belgian writer Noël Godin, who has gained attention for his practice of throwing cream pies as a means of protest. Activists at FEMEN strive to bring “European ideals of freedom, equality, and development of an individual, independently of gender” to their country (FEMEN 2009). While FEMEN protest against Ukraine’s sex industry and adopted topless protests to differentiate the group from Western feminists, FEMEN looks at the societies of Western Europe as models for equality. FEMEN members look at themselves and Ukraine differently from other societies with stronger presence of feminism.

FEMEN activists’ goals resemble those of anti-pornography feminists. Prostitution, sex trafficking, and sex tourism constitute their biggest issues of concern. The dominant structures that subjugate women also control their bodies, which they must use to reverse the dynamics. They believe that reaction toward their topless protests indicates the strength of democracy and equality in the

countries in which they appear. In places activists view as democracies, people respond by shaking their hands while in dictatorships, the response is to arrest the protesters.

The Sextremism of FEMEN: A Response to Ukraine's "Woman Question"

The first topless protest took place in 2009 (Greer 2009). Before this event, Anna Hutsol and Inna Shevchenko had felt doubtful about the decision to appear topless until they saw the attention that their new approach had generated (Neufeld 2012). Since then, their nudity and *vinok*, a traditional Ukrainian flower sheath, have become their "special uniforms" (Westland 2012). Their *vinok* symbolizes the birth of new feminism in Ukraine (Cook 2012). They have appeared topless for many causes of their choice, from promoting reading to protesting against imprisonment of Ukrainian politician Yulia Tymoshenko.

Following the success of FEMEN's topless protests, the organization coined the term "sextremism" to describe their tactic. According to their official website, sextremism is "a new ideology of the women's sexual protest presented by extreme topless campaigns of direct action" (FEMEN 2012). It represents activists' approach of presenting their nude bodies to the public as a medium of protest. Inna Shevchenko, one of the founding members, believes that sextremism replaces the tactics of past feminist movements in the past. They seek to promote a uniquely Ukrainian women's movement.

Inna Shevchenko says that in her country, "men have used women's bodies in the sex industry, the fashion industry, advertising, always in men's hands" (Cochrane 2013). Topless protesters aim to undo this dynamic, give back their bodies "to [their] rightful [owners], to women," and change the contexts in which people see nudity (Cochrane 2013). They protest topless with the aim of reclaiming their bodies. Sextremism challenges the context in which Ukrainian women undress. Instead of stripping

to please men, FEMEN activists appear naked to promote their causes and to protest against gender inequality. They aim to provoke irritation by showing their breasts that “men like” and having “something to say” at the same time. The protests defy societal expectations of women to meet the gaze of men and to stay silent. FEMEN aims to present to the public strong women, who challenge sexualization of women’s bodies and understandings of femininity (Popova 2008).

Since their founding, members have protested against several causes connected with traditional society. They have appeared topless for the liberation of Russian punk rock group Pussy Riot and jailed Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, against the dictatorship of Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko, and against the UEFA Euro 2012 in Poland and in Ukraine. They protested against President of Russia Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill, who has aligned himself with Putin and his party United Russia. They have also appeared in Paris to confront anti-gay protesters. All are issues that they believe are relevant to the status of women in their home country Ukraine. All are issues that perpetuate male ownership of women’s bodies that result in sexual objectification, violence against women, and sexual trafficking.

Topless protests address another problem, also connected to the lack of media attention that FEMEN received for their initial activities. The sextremism of FEMEN comes as a response to lack of women’s rights in Ukraine. Structures of gender inequality have given them little visibility in public unless they appear in sexualized forms. In a country where women experience various forms of inequality, “no one is ready to listen to women,” but people “like looking at them, especially when they are naked” (Arte Creative 2012). Their sexuality represents women’s few means to visibility in Ukraine. They achieve success when they “spread ideas and opinions” to as many people as possible and the public feels irritated by the protesters and becomes exposed to their messages (Westland 2012).

Weak civil society in Ukraine offers little means for activists to express their interests to the public and the government. Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia have neither a civil society that voices dissent toward the government, nor a transparent government that listens to NGOS or allows them freedom in their activities. The United States has funded NGOs in the former Soviet states to foster their growth, but to little success. The difficult relationship between NGOs and the Ukrainian and Russian governments have created tensions between the former Soviet states and the United States. State resistance toward non-governmental organizations has hindered the growth of the civil society. Vladimir Putin has enacted laws that require NGOs to register as “foreign agents,” and has accused them of being instruments of American intervention (Alexeyeva 2012). While Ukraine has a freer civil society, it remains considerably small.

Anna Hutsol recalled that the domestic media ignored the group until international media outlets circulated images of their protests. After Reuters and Agence France-Presse reported on their appearances, Ukrainian newspapers “followed” in the footsteps of others media outlets by continuing to report them (Kamenev 2009). Like FEMEN, other social movements and NGOs rely on the attention from the international media. The media coverage serves another important purpose of giving the group protection through visibility from hostile domestic authorities. The political atmosphere of Ukraine does not allow groups to protest freely. In such climate, Shevchenko believes that the media represents FEMEN’s “best protection” from the Ukrainian government (Quentin 2012). Activists use the international media as a watchdog when their domestic governments scrutinize their actions.

Injuries, arrests, and threats occur commonly as a result of FEMEN protests. Most of them take place in Ukraine. Anna Hutsol claimed that a group of men came to her apartment at night and locked her in a car for two hours (Hutsol 2010). On another occasion, Inna Shevchenko, Oksana Shachko, and two other activists nearly lost their lives after a protest in Belarus. After a protest against the President

Alexander Lukashenko, Belarusian security forces kidnapped them, took them into a forest, and threatened to execute them (Tayler 2013b). They remained in Belarus until a Ukrainian ambassador took them back to Ukraine. Shevchenko believes that their fame as FEMEN activists saved them from executions (Chalupa 2013). A year later in August 2012, Ukrainian security services have unsuccessfully attempted to abduct Inna Shevchenko. In response, she moved to France, where she founded another chapter of the organization, and has yet to return to Ukraine.

The Ukrainian media contribute to negative image of FEMEN in its country. Since the founding of FEMEN, critics have accused the organization of receiving funding from outside governments and that activists receive pay for their protests. They argue that FEMEN activists are foreign agents. Ukrainian *Argumenti i Fakty* estimated the average pay of protesters at 1,000 euros a month (Amelchikina 2012). The list of alleged supporters includes Barack Obama, George Soros, and Yulia Tymoshenko, and Vladimir Putin (Girard 2012). Activists heard this accusation of outside support themselves during their interrogation in Belarus (Girard 2012). FEMEN maintains that all activists are volunteers and that the money that supports the organization comes from small donations and sales from t-shirts and goods on the FEMEN website (Shevchenko 2011).

Other accusations continued from the media. In 2011, the Ukrainian media falsely reported that FEMEN had appeared in support of organization Putin's Army that adopted FEMEN's approach of stripping to express their support for Putin. When Inna Shevchenko cut the Orthodox cross with an electric saw to protest the sentencing of Pussy Riot, the Ukrainian and Russian newspapers *Pravda* and *Izvestia* noted that the cross was an Orthodox monument built to remember the victims of the Great Purge ("Femen 'vyrazili podderzhku i uvazheniye' spiliv krest v Kieve" 2012). Shevchenko refuted the allegation, and said that it is simply a Catholic cross without political significance (Cochrane 2013).

The same political pressure against FEMEN extends to online spaces. Around the same time that Shevchenko left France in 2012, FEMEN lost its account on Livejournal, a social networking platform especially popular in Eastern Europe (“Administraciya Zhivogo Zhurnala Zakryla Blog Dvizheniya Femen” 2012). When the administrators refused to continue hosting their images and videos, activists launched their own website *femen.com*. While domestic opposition hinders FEMEN activists’ political activities, the self-identified sextremists consider the pressure an encouraging sign of change.

Political pressure motivates activists to continue their topless protests, and validate the efficacy of their highly visible tactic. Inna Shevchenko describes the kidnapping incident in Belarus as the “worst day of [her] life,” and simultaneously “the best.” The anger that she generates affirms the necessity of her activism. From the negative reactions, she sees the political possibilities that she can produce, simply by “just taking off [her] t-shirt” (FEMEN 2013b).

Considering the political situation in Ukraine and the surrounding former Soviet states, creativity in their protests has become a political necessity for social movements. Other movements and opposition groups have used tactics that divert from the traditional approach of holding banners and posters. Among these protest groups, Russian punk feminist rock band Pussy Riot has been compared to FEMEN (Kleshchenko 2012). Like their Ukrainian counterpart, Pussy Riot strives for visibility and media coverage. They appear with colorful masks and dresses that obscure their identities, and choose public venues to perform their music with anti-Putin messages. That approach resulted in their performance at the Christ the Savior Cathedral in Moscow, where the band became an international cause célèbre.

Other groups deliberately avoid displaying political messages. In Russia, protesters have chosen to pursue other collective actions without visible political slogans (Kramer and Schwirtz 2012). For example, Russians have gathered in Moscow to perform yoga. In Minsk, young Belarusians against Lukashenko have communicated through social networking platforms Twitter, Facebook, and *Vkontakte*

to protest through simultaneous actions. They include applauding at the same time and setting their alarms on their phones to go off at the same time (Feifer 2011). These protests demonstrate the like-mindedness of the protesters sharing a common place. At the same time, these protests present an advantage of concealing the political purpose for which the protesters have gathered.

The collective actions present the police with a dilemma: the police know that people have convened with a common political cause, but without evidence, they do not know with which to charge them. Using protest as a form of theatre has become a recent political strategy among opposition activists. After the police have intervened against conventional protests with marches and posters, Belarusians and Russians have resorted to mass action without explicit political messages. With their domestic government and the media against them, opposition activists have used greater creativity in their protests and used them as modes of performance.

FEMEN activists keep a similar concern in mind. Accounting for the political atmosphere of Ukraine, the topless protesters strive to generate shock with their bare breasts, and to receive international attention. With their nudity, they initially resemble conventional images of Ukrainian women as variations of the Barbie: models and sex workers. With their messages however, they attack these views surrounding women and their country. They challenge the familiar social scripts of how women should behave, how people should voice their political opinions.

The Aesthetics of FEMEN Protests

Nudity in Feminist Art

Decades before FEMEN activists described themselves as “sextremists,” feminist artists and art historians first sought to reclaim their bodies and debated the same questions that FEMEN activists encounter today. The feminist art movement began in the 1960s. In 1970, Linda Nochlin offered the first women’s studies course on art and in 1974, feminist artist Judy Chicago taught the first feminist studio art course was at Fresno State University in 1970 (White 1976:340). In Chicago’s words, feminist art movement brought to light that “the personality structure of a woman, as dictated by the society... is inconsistent with the personality structure that is necessary to make art” (White 1976:343). To challenge this relationship between gender and art, she created the 1979 exhibition *The Dinner Party*. It displayed 39 prominent women throughout different periods in history to challenge their omission from history. Like Chicago, Feminist artists and art critics sought to raise the consciousness of aspiring women artists. Since the beginning of the feminist art movement, feminist artists and art historians have sought to change the image of women in art, deconstruct art as a predominantly male pursuit, and allow more women to pursue art and engage in criticism.

Women art historians deconstructed gender relations in art from a feminist standpoint. In art, men have represented women’s bodies. On their canvasses, men created art to serve as a “moral arbiter,” a “pure agent” that provided insight into ethics and legitimacy into their world views (Bryant 1994:98). Art has been removed from recognition as a social entity. Due to its isolation, few questioned what art promotes until the rise of feminist art. Despite its image of neutrality, art comprised another male dominated domain. Feminist art historians refuted this myth that art contains no politics and expose art as a gendered entity.

In these conditions, women in art have attempted to reclaim women's sexuality through re-representation of women's bodies. Nude female bodies differ from nude male bodies, because women's bodies come with an added layer of meaning. Representation of female bodies has shown "depiction, idealization, fetishization of the female form" (Battista 2013:12). Portraying nude bodies fell between the possibility of liberation and the risk of self-exploitation (Battista 2013:13). Representation of women's bodies reflects the historical fact that women's bodies and sexuality has belonged to men and the connection between nudity and sexuality.

With the rise of the feminist art movement, women's artists immediately sought to change portrayals of women's sexuality. Artists and critics who identified with the feminist art movement sought to offer their own portrayals of their body and sexuality. Among the first feminist works, Carolee Schneemann produced *Fuses*, which depicted her and her boyfriend engaging in sexual intercourse. Another feminist exhibition, *Bad Girls*, also sought to challenge this. The curators termed the phenomenon carnivalization of women's bodies (Tucker 1994:33). Using grotesque body forms, the artists sought to produce discomfort toward people by transgressing norms surrounding women's bodies. Some involved explicit desexualization of women's bodies. In many of these works, artists sought to portray themselves.

Performance art allowed feminist artists to assume the role of the artist and the muse at once (Battista 2013:53). By representing themselves, they could appear to address issues and norms that shape women's bodies. Performance art carried an advantage in that the distance between the artist and the viewer becomes minimal. As the artist is the artwork, the artist and the viewer interact directly. In many of these works, artists sought to portray themselves and at the same time, appropriate forms of dominant culture that subjugate women. Appropriation promotes an "unequal exchange," in which one

benefits at the expense of another (Bryant 1994:100). By appropriating images of femininity into their artworks, feminist artists subvert and remove legitimacy from prevailing images of women.

For example, one Manchester-based English artist Linder combined the sexualized woman and the housewife into one painting. Her painting depicted a woman, whose face Linder replaced with a cake. The cake hides the woman's face and removes her identity. The woman, whose only visible parts are her bare breasts and her manicured hands, is surrounded by larger-than-life kitchen utensils and dessert dishes (Battista 2013:107). The painting constitutes a feminist attempt at appropriating symbols of private sphere of domesticity, consumption culture, and sexual objectification and combining them into one painting. The painting points out the connection between the three and the absurdity of norms that govern women's lives.

FEMEN activists seek to achieve a similar aim of deconstructing women's bodies in their protests. Whatever costume they wear – whether this be a French maid costume, their usual *vinoks*, or nothing at all – they seek to juxtapose this form with feminist slogans and anger. However, FEMEN activists encountered similar problems that these women artists did in their portrayal of nude bodies. While some women artists found the naked body to be an empowering tool, other women felt the need to remove the female body from representation. From their views, the act of representation alone rendered women's bodies as objects open to manipulation and control (Battista 2013:13). Regardless of their intentions, questions remain on whether their performance is “linked to subjectivity” (Battista 2013:55). Depiction of female nudity despite intentions runs on the “knife edge” between empowerment and the “possibility of joining this spectacle of woman” (Battista 2013:78).

While FEMEN claims that sextremism represents “new feminism,” other women have used their nudity and sexuality to promote their interests. In 2004, Indian women have also staged nude protests to protest rape (Misri 2011). In 2009, Kenyan women have staged sex strikes to protest corruption in

their government (Pflanz 2009). They withheld sex from their boyfriends and husbands until they would stop fighting. In public, women presented themselves naked, daring male passersby to rape them. Slut walks, in which FEMEN has also participated, have taken place concurrently with FEMEN's topless protests. They did so with the aim of reclaiming their sexuality that men have taken or for the justice of their greater community.

The shock that nudity generates challenges the expectation that women's bodies are to be presented on billboards to promote products and in bedrooms for the eyes of men. FEMEN members say that appearing topless affords them the power to reverse this norm. Critics disagree and say that such a claim reduces women to their sexuality, just as other societal forces do.

The Aesthetics of FEMEN: Recreating the Ukrainian Woman

FEMEN protesters challenge the norm of women's sexual subordination by men. FEMEN's tactic of using bodies to reclaim sexuality has precedents in performance art. In the beginning, protesters appeared with the aim of appealing to the public with their beauty. Blonde, young, and thin women have comprised the majority of activists. In a 2012 Finnish documentary, Alexandra Shevchenko remarked that because of her movement, "People will talk about feminists as beautiful, naked women, not as butch, bald, and tattooed feminists" (YLE 2012). However, she later recanted her remark, and said that anyone can join, citing an example of member Alexandra Nemchicova, a larger woman who weighs 120kg (Steirischer Herbst Festival 2012). By promoting women's interests topless, members seek to produce shock and challenge the norm of sexual objectification of their bodies by men. They do not seek to "attract," but to "scare" with their shock protests (Cook 2012). In February 2013, FEMEN reaffirmed that the organization does not recruit women on the basis of their appearance (Femen 2013c). The only requirement for joining FEMEN is willingness to protest topless.

Protesters find their naked bodies empowering. In various meanings surrounding and controlling women's bodies, activists see potential in addressing various issues that shape the social world of women around the world. Similar to feminist performance artists, FEMEN activists simultaneously assume the role of the artist and the artwork. Their bodies become the canvas, on which they represent themselves to convey their messages. In addition to the poster that they carry with their hands, their bare breasts serve as a second poster and the focal point that attracts attention from passersby.

Topless activists aim to use their body and sexuality toward the goal of uplifting the status of women. They understand the various meanings surrounding a woman's naked body. Sometimes, they appear in sexually explicit costumes, while in other occasions, their costumes conflict with the femininity of their breasts. Considering in which contexts sexually explicit images are desired or obscene, they appear accordingly.

One sexually explicit protest took place in front of Dominique Strauss-Kahn's house in Paris in 2011. As a response to his rape allegations, three FEMEN activists staged an appearance that consisted of several routines. The footage of their protest shows their buttocks in black lace panties face the public as they soak their rags in buckets. They repeat singing "Voulez vous coucher avec moi ce soir" as they wipe down his door with rags. Eventually, they abandon the pretense of seductive French maids, as they shout "Shame on you!" and beat his door and the ground with feather dusters and rags. Their protest ends with "D\$K fuck me in Porsche Cayenne" (Margot 2011a). Here, they present their bodies in sexually explicit forms. All three women are blonde, thin, and with make-up. Their appearances definitely meet the male gaze. Some of the men in the audience look amused. During the duration of the footage, they protest without police intervention.

In other protests, they appear naked, but without presenting their bodies in sexually explicit forms or before a wide audience. In one protest in Minsk, Belarus, among one of their most dangerous

protests, they appeared with costumes that mocked President Lukashenko. Against Lukashenko, they appeared with mustaches, his trademark. One of the women, Alexandra Nemchinova, weighs 120kg and appears with epaulets. Here, they use the association between nudity and profanity. Knowing that creating a caricature of Lukashenko would stir anger, they appear topless with elements that clearly indicate their mockery of the Belarusian president.

Another challenges the virgin/whore dichotomy. Against far-right Catholics against legalization of gay marriage, FEMEN protesters appeared in sexualized nun costumes. While their breasts remained bare as usual, they appeared in nuns' headdresses and spray bottles that read "Holy Sperm," with which they threatened to spray the anti-gay protesters (Tamara 2012). Here, they sexualized the virgin nuns to stir anger from self-proclaimed devout Catholics, who see that FEMEN have recreated the divine into the profane. They presented their bare breasts toward those who believe that women's bodies should remain in private. They exploited the same emotion when they appeared naked inside a cathedral in Paris and on the streets of the Vatican. Here, their nudity strongly violates the norm of modesty.



Figure 5 FEMEN protesters threaten to spray anti-gay protesters with "Jesus Sperm."

Domestically, they appeared on Independence Day in Ukraine and before Euro 2012, a continental football tournament that Ukraine co-hosted with Poland. Appearing topless with long skirts and a sickle in their hand, they mocked the progress that Ukraine has made since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. They draw connections between the process of state building and the place of women in this process. International events like the EURO challenge Ukraine to meet international standards. Ukraine renovated airports for foreign fans, built accommodations, and renovated stadiums. Standing

before large paintings that read “Welcome to Lviv,” they challenge that image of Ukraine that the government has put forward to tourists. At the same time, it brushes aside problems that exist in its society.

While their bare breasts remain the focal point of their protests, their costumes play an important role in contextualizing their bodies. Their costumes show the remnants of women who have once conformed to gender expectations. The French maid is the whore who strives to meet the male gaze and provides men sexual satisfaction. The *vinok*, a part of the traditional Ukrainian costume, remind viewers of the beautiful, traditional Ukrainian women, who fulfill the roles of mother and wife. The nun represents the modest virgin, whose chastity meets gender roles prescribed in scriptures. All these women, who have submitted toward social forces that subjugated them, have given way to angry women who have come to consciousness and now protest their conditions. Sometimes, they appear sexualized, while other times they appear ridiculous and unfeminine. All protests end with their shouting of their slogans of the day.

Activists seek to challenge the taboo surrounding nudity. “It was men who made breasts into a secret” (Bidder 2012). Men made women’s bodies into their properties and tools for their satisfaction. Women’s bodies have become taboo. “I think men like women’s breasts,” says Shevchenko, “but they don’t like it when they have something to say as well.” While initially stripping to entice viewers, FEMEN eventually provoked and irritated their viewers.

Through their topless protests, activists seek to use the “contradiction” that viewers feel when they see simultaneous presentation of “nakedness,” “intelligence,” and “their ideas” (Brooke 2012). FEMEN subverts the image of the ideal post-Soviet Ukrainian woman. They mock the traditional image of the Slavic women and the gender roles associated with tradition. With *vinoks* on their head and angry

expressions on their faces, they combine the image of the ideal, feminine Ukrainian women and the undesirable feminist in one canvas that is the naked body.

FEMEN claims to take an approach different from Western feminists, who “look and dress like men” (Chalupa 2013). FEMEN uses femininity to express their strength, instead of appropriating images of masculinity to do so. In their protests, FEMEN activists have appeared without t-shirts, but almost always with *vinoks*, a sheath and a feature of the Ukrainian traditional dress. The headdress comprises a part of the Ukrainian traditional dress, worn by girls and unmarried women. They wear the wreath on their heads and on their chests nothing. Sometimes, they appear with traditional patterns on their torsos. Their appearances provoke and mock the image of the Ukrainian woman. Since many are blonde and thin, they present themselves as sexually attractive women, who attract the male gaze and challenge it at the same time. Their breasts emphasize their femininity free of objectification.

Protesters’ nudity renders their bodies untouchable to the men who surround them in public. Unlike on other occasions, when women appear naked for the pleasure of men, men cannot touch them. The police officers often struggle to take them away, sometimes putting a coat on them first to allow the male touch. They appeared in the public sphere, nude for their own purposes and not to serve the sexual interests of men. They redefine the purposes of their own bodies, which traditionally serve to satisfy sexual desires of men. Often, their bodies were the only points of importance and power in Ukrainian society.

Topless protests bring to question when the female body is acceptable for men to touch and to manipulate according to their desires. Bodies of women appear in their bedrooms. They appear in advertisements, that objectify them along with the products that the market. When they appear in public for neither of the purposes, when they do not appear to force the male gaze, the situation becomes different. It reverses the relationship between the male gaze and women’s bodies. In

dominant structures, the male gaze shapes the purpose, the appearance, and the contexts in which women's bodies can be presented. In their protests, however, the nudity of FEMEN activists forces the male gaze. Their bodies direct the male gaze toward the grievances that they hope to address.

FEMEN activists take into account the surrounding political and social contexts that shape women's roles in society and place them below those of men. The topless protests of mostly young women challenges the dominant model of femininity and stereotypes surrounding women and feminism. They reproduce images of the ideal Ukrainian woman and subvert it outside intended contexts. Like prostitutes, whose numbers have grown significantly since Ukrainian independence, they present themselves naked, ostensibly for the male gaze. However, they meet the male gaze to challenge male domination, instead of giving them sexual satisfaction.

To the topless protesters, the act of undressing represents freedom. In the same various, contradictory standards that control women's bodies, members see possibilities for challenging gender equality. While appearing topless to promote the interests of women and not those of men, they reject their bodies as domains of subjugation. While they appear in sexually explicit forms, they reject their sexuality as a venue for oppression. Through presentation of their topless bodies, FEMEN challenges mutual exclusivity of the feminine and the feminist. In doing so, they reject the association of weakness and subservience with femininity. Their bare breasts give the activists an unambiguously feminine appearance and emphasize their identity as women, in which they take pride. At the same time, they strive for political visibility and power that few women have in Ukraine. Femininity has stood in opposition to Soviet womanhood and Western feminism, but they combine both images of the feminine and the feminist.

FEMEN protests challenge another distinction between the public and the private. Despite the scale of sexual trafficking in post-Soviet Ukraine, the issue of prostitution has remained largely invisible

until FEMEN brought them out to the public. Through members' reinterpretations of gender roles, they have mocked the male gaze and reversed the social dynamics that keep women down. While topless, their bodies are not bare. They use their bodies as canvasses, on which they use text and national symbols to recreate the Ukrainian woman. They combine images of the idealized, feminine Ukrainian woman and the prostitute. On the body of one activist, viewers see the myth of *Berehynia* and the prostitute of the back alley. They present to the public the prevalent, yet hidden reality of the sexually objectified and commodified Ukrainian woman.

When women place themselves at the center of attention, women always run the risk of sexually objectifying themselves (Bautista 2013:78). At the same time, they leave themselves to the interpretation of the viewers (Battista 2013:79). While FEMEN considers itself a group of liberated women, the viewers may perceive legitimacy in objectifying women. For those who are simply excited to see bare breasts, the viewers may simply disregard the messages that FEMEN wish to convey in their protests and gaze at them for their own pleasure.

Nudity as a tactic of protest leaves the risk of leaving viewers to their interpretation. Supporters of FEMEN may see complex mockery and manipulations of gender roles and images of women. In this aspect, FEMEN protests may run the risk of creating a recursive discourse: while it reenacts situations of inequality in explicit images for the public to see, the act of staging itself does not change the dynamic.

For the same reason that FEMEN sees feminist possibilities in showing bare breasts to the public, a male spectator may feel excitement upon seeing women perform without listening to them. To spectators unfamiliar with them, FEMEN may perpetuate the norm of being seen and not heard, which goes against their central motive for stripping. To those who do not share the group's standpoint of the woman or the feminist, FEMEN often presents bodies of a sexually desirable young, blonde woman. They will not change their opinions about the status of women. In the case of generating a recursive

discourse, FEMEN may engage and mobilize existing groups of supporters, such as feminists sympathetic to the organization. For those who are not, their minds before and after their performance will look no different. Their tactic of topless protests, despite the historically loaded meaning surrounding women's bodies, has resulted in criticism from fellow feminists.

This Is What a Feminist Looks Like: FEMEN's Conflicts with Other Feminists

Anna Hutsol created FEMEN to address the situation of women in Ukraine. As they have received international attention for their topless protests, however, members have broadened their aim toward uplifting gender inequality in other parts of the world. On its fifth anniversary, FEMEN declared their goals as such (FEMEN 2013b):

- immediate political deposition of all dictatorial regimes creating unbearable living conditions for women, first of all, theocratic Islamic states practicing Shari'ah and other forms of sadism to women;
- complete extermination of prostitution as an egregious form of exploitation of women by criminalizing the clients, investors and organizers of slave-trade. To acknowledge sex-industry as the most large-scale and long-term genocide against women;
- to universally and completely separate church from state and to prohibit any intervention of the religious institutions in the civic, sex and reproductive live (*sic*) of modern women.

As their group received international attention and founded chapters in other countries, the topless activists have created greater tension with their fellow feminists. Their critics include women that activists seek to liberate: Muslim women and sex workers. Western feminists, who Shevchenko has said are “stuck in the world of conferences and books,” comprise another group and note that the majority of the topless protesters appear thin, young, and blonde (Wilsher 2012).

FEMEN has received criticism for their stance on the sex industry, one of the biggest issues of concern for FEMEN. In their protests, members remove the agency of sex workers. In one protest in Germany in January 2013, they drew comparisons between prostitution and fascism by drawing mustaches on under their noses and saluting passersby near a sex shop. Inna Shevchenko says that the sex industry has no “connections to women’s opinion, to women’s choice,” because it is a business that serves the interests of “men, of sex bosses, and women in this business are only an instrument to earn money, and nothing more” (Cook 2012). Alexandra Shevchenko similarly dismisses women’s agency in

sex work as a “myth” and prostitution “the first and last form of slavery on earth” (Manyueko 2012 and Connolly 2013). Their claims conflict with those of sex-positive feminists, who have promoted the interests of sex workers and actresses in pornography.

Feminist critics find FEMEN protesters’ view of nudity problematic. Inna Shevchenko has remarked that if women wanted to find freedom, they could simply go outside and strip. Feminist critics find her statement problematic for various reasons. As an organization of predominantly thin, young, blonde women, FEMEN reinforce the norm of the male gaze, encouraging men to abandon their oppressive ways toward women in exchange for glimpses of their bodies.

Muslim Women, Let’s Get Naked: FEMEN’s problem with Islam and Islamic feminism

To Islamic feminists, topless protesters’ actions indicate neocolonialist assumption toward the Arab and Muslim world and inability to account for intersectionality of women, both of which they have seen from other Western feminists. Protesters’ nudity represents yet another form of unsolicited intervention that Muslim women do not want. From Shevchenko’s point of view, the conservative Islamic attire that hides women represents male control of their sexuality, not protection from sexual objectification. Nudity alone represents freedom from male standards that determine how women appear in public and in private. It represents a means through which women appropriate male desire to access their bodies to gain access into public space. While FEMEN activists claim to be international, the protests show disregard for religions, all of which they believe subjugate women. They view Islam like the way that they treat the Russian Orthodox Church. All are institutions that subjugate women.

Such conflict arose during an interview that Inna Shevchenko has had with other feminists in a program at *Al-Jazeera*. Inna Shevchenko said, “Better naked than burqa.” Burqa is a “men’s clothes that they wear women in” (sic) (The Stream 2012). In a male-dominated society, conforming to dress

standards of the society represents accepting female subordination. Nudity without clothing represents a clean slate, free of social structures that favor men.

Founder Anna Hutsol shares Shevchenko's pejorative view toward the Arab and Muslim worlds. She has attributed the marginalization of Ukrainian women to the persistence of the "Arab mentality towards women" in her country (Tayler 2012). She considers "Arab" synonymous with traditional expectations that women marry, raise her children, and stay out of politics (Tayler 2012). Other members consistently repeat this belief in their protests. "Muslims, let's get naked," has featured as a regular slogan on the topless bodies of FEMEN activists (Bryant 2012). FEMEN members' expectations of Muslim women reveal contradictions in their beliefs. The activists have spoken from the standpoint of the marginalized Ukrainian woman as a reason for their topless protests, but do not understand the position of Muslim women.

FEMEN has staged protests against Sharia laws on multiple occasions. In one occasion, they staged a protest against International Olympic Committee at the Tower Bridge in London. They condemned the Olympics as an "Arab marathon," and criticized IOC for allowing Islamic countries to participate in the 2012 London Olympics. As Sharia law of these countries have repressed women, Alexandra Shevchenko said that countries that oppress women and allow few female athletes as tokens cannot participate (Cook 2012).

On various occasions, they have protested alongside Arab and Muslim protesters to the irritation of other Arabs and Muslims. In front of the Swedish consulate, members protested against Sharia law once again with the arrival of an Egyptian activist Alia El-Mahdy. After uploading her nude pictures on her blog, El-Mahdy flew to Ukraine to protest with other FEMEN members before the Egyptian consulate.

Another clash with Muslim women occurred when FEMEN staged a support in support of Tunisian activist Amina Tyler. Tyler, like El-Mahdy, had expressed support for FEMEN by posting pictures of her topless. On her breasts, she painted “My body belongs to me and is not the source of anyone's honor” in Arabic and “Fuck your morals” in English (Tayler 2013c). The Tunisian Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice called for death by stoning (Tayler 2013c). When Tyler’s parents sent her to a psychiatric ward and FEMEN lost contact with the Tunisian, Inna Shevchenko



Figure 6 FEMEN protesters prepare to burn a Salafist flag in front of the Great Mosque of Paris.

blamed the threats that Tyler has received on the backwardness of the Islamic world.

On the controversy surrounding Tyler, Shevchenko said, “Muslim men shroud their women in black sacks of submissiveness and fear, and dread as they do the devil the moment women break free to light, peace, and freedom.” (Shevchenko 2013). In

support of Tyler, FEMEN members asked supporters to submit nude pictures of themselves to their facebook page. Activists’ campaign for Tyler culminated with “International Topless Jihad Day” on April 4. For the occasion, they burned Salafist flags outside the Paris Mosque. Some of the protesters painted mustaches and wore black masks to appropriate Arab men. The protest again showed topless protesters’ disapproval of the religion and little efforts to distinguish between Islam and Islamism. As their protest site, they chose a mosque in Paris that had no contribution to Tyler’s conditions. In supporting Tyler, they blamed Muslim men and blamed their religion.

Muslim women reacted negatively against FEMEN’s campaign against Islam and Islamism. Muslim women staged a counterprotest “Muslim Women against FEMEN” on facebook. In response to topless protests that target Muslims, Islamic feminists claim that Western powers have historically cited

women's rights to colonize and invade their countries. However, Inna Shevchenko disregarded protests from Muslim women.

In assuming universality of their feminism, FEMEN members take a colonialist view toward Muslim women and their activism. Several activists have stated that they see Islam and feminism as conflicting ideologies. In protests and in talks, they speak of Islam and Islamism interchangeably. They do not draw distinction between the religion that has changed with time and the political implementation of fundamentalist Islam. The low status of women in the Muslim world proves the consequence of religion run amok. Their veiled form proves that their bodies are one of the domains under male control. Inna and Alexandra Shevchenko have promised to appear anywhere, including on the streets of Iran and the Arab countries.

Although FEMEN activists have adopted sextremism to advocate for interests and issues unique to Ukrainian women, they believe that liberated women from other cultures and societies should adopt their viewpoint which would entail that they remove their clothing and abandon their religion. They have made the mistake of other Western feminists, who have also reduced the oppression of Muslim women to their clothing (Al-Marayati and Semeen 2002).

FEMEN members consider feminism universal. FEMEN activists believe that their sextremism differs from feminist movements of Western European countries and that their approach best serves the interests of Ukrainian women. They have opted for sextremism, because they have considered and understand the social and political contexts of Ukraine in which there is little presence or history of feminism and women have little political representation. However, they have not shown the same efforts in understanding the situation of women in the Middle East and the Arab world.

Their sextremism comes from their lack of intersectionality. They do not understand different forms of oppression. While they have advocated for several issues, they have protested against male-

dominated institutions, such as those of the government and religion. The political structure and the daily reality in the Middle Eastern world differ from those of Ukraine. People live under dangers of attacks from Western forces. They can lose their relatives, who are also male. When FEMEN appropriates symbols of Arab and Muslim societies, activists no longer appropriate symbols of the dominant culture, but of an already marginalized society. Their use of the veil and mustaches in their protests repeat the dynamic, in which the Western world represents the East.

Muslim women's perspectives differ from those of FEMEN activists. Muslim women see their societies come under attack from Western forces. In the case of the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, First Lady Laura Bush has cited women's rights as a pretext for American invasion. However, the wars have created greater instability and danger for women. In Palestine, women do not understand the importance of birth control, because they consider the act of giving birth to their children a form of resistance against Israeli state practices of genocide and ethnic cleansing (Bouteldja 2010). The Muslim world has suffered from military intervention from Western powers, especially the United States. While FEMEN activists target men and customs of their Muslim countries, the enemies of Muslim women are not their male compatriots, but outside forces that compromise the stability of their countries and endanger the safety of local men.

Islamic feminists call for reinterpretation of their religion, a religion that FEMEN activists seek to abolish altogether. Contrary to the assumptions of the topless protesters, Muslim feminists want to address issues that do not concern their clothing. French-Algerian activist Houria Bouteldja argues that the very question of compatibility between Islam and feminism reflect Eurocentric assumptions of feminists (Bouteldja 2010). Muslim women demand respect for their religion and culture. The sexism of FEMEN comes from Western contexts that surround them. Both local men and women reject the presence of FEMEN for their Eurocentric vision of women's liberation. FEMEN members'

solution to achieving gender inequality is secular democracy. It does not consider the ways in which Islam gives positive meanings to women's lives and surrounding institutions provide support. It stands in way of feminist consciousness. In Islamic feminism, or in other movements that see religion as instruments for justice, Islam is the instrument that activists wish to appropriate. FEMEN wishes to abolish them.

Body Politics and the Male Gaze

The hostility that activists have generated through their topless protests contrasts with the claims of Western feminist criticism. Contrary to the claims that FEMEN gained popularity through their sexuality, members received threats to their lives in Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia. In these countries, politicians have accused FEMEN disgracing their country. Security services have threatened to kill the protesters, and barred Shevchenko and Hutsol from entering their countries. The self-identified extremists consider the political pressure a sign of their efficacy in producing positive changes for women.

Presenting their naked bodies for protests, FEMEN aims to reclaim women's bodies. However, not all feminists agree with their approach of extremism. Feminists who criticize FEMEN have noticed that their topless protests reinforce the male gaze by attracting attention to their breasts. Australian feminist Germaine Greer says that if she, during her youth, had volunteered to pose topless, "every soft-porn mag would have helped itself" (Greer 2013). By appearing topless, regardless of the context in which strip, the topless activists are objectifying themselves as women are depicted in their daily lives.

Critics have noted that most of the feminists are thin, white, and blonde, qualities which make them look conventionally attractive (Girard 2012). Favorable coverage of the group has also noted that

FEMEN activists “put their beauty on display with peroxide-blond hair, heavy eye makeup and high heels” (Neufeld 2012).

German anti-pornography activist and feminist Alice Schwarzer has spoken in support of FEMEN. She remarked, “The Femen women are catching the boomerang in mid-air and throwing it back,” she wrote. She supports the tactic of FEMEN protesters that their bare breasts, “which would normally objectify them, becomes a weapon for them. They use it to attract looks, and to deliver their message to men, namely their protest against the exposure of women! Against prostitution! Against trafficking in women! I think that's a good thing” (Neufeld 2012). However, other feminists have criticized FEMEN for continuing the problem of sexual objectification of women and for exacerbating one problem of inequality to address another.

Western feminists have attacked FEMEN activists for using their bodies to attract the male gaze. The actions of FEMEN evoke other feminist theories, such as sex-positive feminism. Their sextremism comes from their insistence on presenting their naked bodies to the public and using their sexualities to achieve their interests. At the same time, they have emphasized their firm opposition against prostitution, which has remained one of their key issues since the beginning. During their activities in Germany, where prostitution is legal, Alexandra Shevchenko has described prostitution as “modern genocide of women.” FEMEN’s stance on prostitution continues to rest on the belief that women in the sex industry are victims. Although FEMEN protests challenge the dynamic between men and women, the observer and the seen, they do not consider the possibility that sex workers have agency in their occupations.

FEMEN has received comparisons with PETA (Buss 2011). PETA has used female celebrities to promote animal rights and veganism in the same way that FEMEN activists appear to the public as thin, young women to promote their various messages (Dmitrieva 2011). In turn, PETA advertisements used

thinness and physical attractiveness to promote a case for veganism. Likewise, FEMEN has perpetuated the problem of sexual objectification of women's bodies.

FEMEN activists provided a contextual response to problem of gender inequality in Ukraine. Their awareness of the conditions of women and their personal experiences have inspired their tactic of topless protests. In various protests in Ukraine, they appear in forms that appropriate the traditional image of the Ukrainian women: the flower sheath and stitch patterns of the traditional Ukrainian dress. On the plight of women in other parts of the world, FEMEN has not shown the same level of consideration and understanding. Toward the Arab world, they do not show the same regard for Arab world that has traditions and structures different from their own. By saying that all women can find freedom in nakedness, FEMEN activists have disregarded the significance of intersectionality. They have alienated women, who consider Islam significant in their lives. The stance of FEMEN on the Arab and Muslim world compromises its commitment to thrive as a transnational movement.

Conclusion

In 2008, Anna Hutsol, Alexandra Shevchenko, and Oksana Shachko founded FEMEN to challenge the status of women in Ukraine. At best, Ukrainian women found reliable partners, married early, and stayed home to raise their children. At worst, they became commodities in international marriage agencies, prostitution, and pornography. They noticed that women's oppression took shape according to male desire. Seeing this, they decided to reclaim their bodies by using their nudity as instruments for their political interests.

Their protests have shown understanding toward the conditions of Ukrainian women and the political structures of post-Soviet states that have resisted civil societies. The self-identified sextremists strive for "civil self-expression based on creativity, courage, humor, efficiency and shock" in their protests (Hutsol 2009). Inna Shevchenko has made sweeping promises about the potentials of topless protests. She believes that FEMEN's tactic of sextremism uplifts all women. Her belief applies to women in the Middle East, where she believes that women's oppression is most severe.

To defend the necessity of topless protests, members contrast the situation of women with that of the Western world, and at the same time consider the Western world the standard. They describe Ukraine as a country with no history of feminism and little rights for women. In their minds, the severity of women's situation entails rejection of obsolete "classical feminism" and adoption of a provocative tactic. At the same time, they wish to see for their country to emulate other Western societies. They simultaneously uphold Western standards as ideal, considering European societies as the ideal places for women. Their proclamation of nudity as freedom upholds another Western dichotomy between the nudity and the veil. While members proclaim themselves as the new feminists, they make the same mistake that Western feminists have made by reducing the problems of Muslim women to their attire.

Since its beginning in 2008, FEMEN has taken a more international direction. Abroad, activists no longer protest to represent themselves, but impose their views on other women. While they initially appeared topless against patriarchal structures that have reduced them to their bodies, members now find freedom in their nakedness, and demand the same to other women of different religions, cultures, and countries. FEMEN members envision a world, in which a liberated woman would not wear a hijab. They do not understand the contexts of a world that Western powers have colonized and invaded, citing women's rights as pretext for their actions. Their insistence on topless protests limits the only means of liberation to nudity. The topless protesters have failed to account for the intersectionality of women and understand the diversity of issues that they wish to address.

FEMEN members recognize the structures of their marginalization and distinguish themselves from other Western women. Yet, they do not fully account for the diversity of women outside the Western world. In their activism, they seek the ways in which they can reclaim their bodies from men, who have exploited them for their pleasure. However, they do not consider the same possibilities when it comes to Islam or sex work, which Muslim and sex-positive feminists do not consider oppressive, and, in fact, value.

Members have said that naked protests will not be the only tactic of FEMEN. They have repeatedly expressed her interest in founding a political party (Galperina 2011, Prymachyk 2010, Tayler 2012). Founder Anna Hutsol has acknowledged that challenging inequality "needs some political will, not just shouting and drawing a wide response" (Prymachyk 2010). She says that topless protests will serve as a starting point to address the issues against which they have appeared. Another member Yana Zhdanova promises that participation in FEMEN protests will one day become the "sinful past of female politicians" (Tayler 2012). However, gaining political representation for the protesters and other women at large may prove difficult to achieve if they restrict the only means of liberation to nudity and their

bodies as the only domain that they have found worthy of reclaiming. Toward other institutions, sex work, religion, and the government, they have attempted to disrupt, not to reclaim.

To continue as a movement, FEMEN activists must not only diversify their tactics, but also their perspective. They must understand in what contexts sex workers participate in the industry, and for what reasons Muslim women value their religion and culture. Alienating the very women that they seek to liberate will compromise the members' credibility as feminists and the aim of FEMEN to lead a women's movement.

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