

## Nudity as Strategy: Examining Femen Sextremism Ideology to Weaponize Women's Body

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### Abstrak:

Dalam konteks gerakan perempuan, Femen banyak didiskusikan karena strategi protes yang dianggap kontroversial karena menggunakan tubuh telanjang sebagai alat untuk menyampaikan pesan politik. Hal ini menimbulkan berbagai anggapan bahwa mereka dituduh menegaskan stereotipe standar kecantikan berbasis Barat dan memarginalkan pengalaman perempuan di luar kulit putih. Terlepas dari kontroversinya, Femen mendapatkan atensi internasional sejak awal gerakan ini melakukan aksinya pada tahun 2009 hingga sekarang. Tulisan ini mengeksplorasi masalah tersebut dengan mendiskusikan faktor-faktor mendukung Femen mendapat atensi internasional dan mampu mempertahankan eksistensi gerakannya sampai sekarang. Argumen yang diajukan adalah bahwa terdapat dua faktor menjadi pendukung keberlanjutan gerakan. Pertama, Femen dapat menerjemahkan ideologi sextremisme menjadi aksi protes yang berkelanjutan. Kedua, Femen telah mengembangkan gerakan sosial yang terorganisir, namun tetap fleksibel dengan membentuk ikatan informal yang kuat melalui latihan fisik menyerupai militer

**Keywords:** Femen, Topless Protest, Sextremism, Feminism.

### Abstract:

In the age of the new wave feminism movement, Femen stood out to be one of the heavily discussed topics of women's movements due to its controversial protest strategy. They are one of few feminist movements that utilize, or in their terms, weaponize, the naked body to deliver a political message. It generates various backlash, upon which they are accused of perpetuating western biased standards of beauty and marginalizing non-white women's experience. Despite the controversy, they gained international recognition from the birth of the movement in 2009 until recently. We explore the matters by examining the enabling factors supporting the global movement to endure the controversy over the last decade. We conclude that two factors play a crucial role in the movement's sustainability. First, how they encapsulate and translate the sextremism ideology into firm action. Second, Femen has developed a firm, organized, yet fluid social movement by establishing strong informal ties through soldier-like training.

**Keywords:** Femen, Topless Protest, Sextremism, Feminism.

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## Introduction

Each and every era have various ways to interpret feminism. Regarding social movement, the feminist movement has a long historical trajectory which helps shape the latest perception of the movement paradigm. It started with the first wave in the midst 1700s that focused on seizing women's voting rights (Sanders, 2004). The movement rolled out as firm solidarity that lasted for ages. In this age, the women's movement was dominated by consolidated protest before the targeted object (Heilmann, 2000). The targeted object refers to the perceived- source of women's repression.

Moreover, the women's movement here was executed to claim the political rights of women that will legitimize women's role in the social structure. By having a vote, women will seize power in front of authority and secure part as determining voice of the political structure at that time. At the late development of the first wave, the activist consolidated into the National Women's Party (NWP), which basically secured women's suffrage (DuBois, 2000).

As time went by, the era of the 1960s posed another form of challenge to the women's movement. In this age, the women's movement brought up existential issues such as freedom of expression (Shaw, 2003). A series of women's protests marked the second wave of feminism that targeted the oppressive symbolization of women. The notable event of the second-wave era was the protest of the New York Radical Feminists to the Miss America beauty pageant, deemed as a symbolization of the exploitation of women's bodies (Echols, 1989). The protester radically violated the event by throwing shoes at the contestant and the committee.

The third wave of feminism, often called new feminism, emerged at the dawn of the Cold War, around the early 1990s. The value grows big due to media support that repeatedly announces the symptom (Bronstein, 2005). The era is characterized by a more transnational approach to responding to gender-based discrimination issues in particular areas. Strategy-wise, in this era women's movement, executed a variety of protest strategies. A more theatrical, subversive, and satirical approach was deployed to engage in the fight against oppressive structure (Butler, 1990). Despite the before notion, the movement of this generation often captures the issues of women's fundamental rights that the

outsider has violated. One prominent characteristic of the new feminism was that instead of employing radical and coercive strategy as witnessed in the second wave, they instead employed a discursive approach to target society's awareness of the issues by publishing and writing books and by delving into the popular culture spreading the message of feminism (Snyder-Hall, 2010).

The new feminism, mainly echoed in the US, also resonated in Europe. European women's movement developed similarly to the US (Offen, 2000). The European women's movement commonly aims to deconstruct the common perception of women's rights and gender in general. Thus, they did not engage in the coercive manners deployed in the past age of the women's movement. It fits the pattern drawn from new feminism that concludes the women's movement as the persuasive and discursively targeting common misperception of women and gender in general. The core issues were also discrimination against women's rights and identity by an outsider. The pattern continued until arguably 2008 when a contradictive women's movement called Femen first executed their aggressive protest.

The Femen movement was first established in Ukraine in 2008 and quickly gained international recognition shortly after their first public appearance due to their radical and controversial topless protest strategy. From 2008-2013 they claimed to gain support from similar movements from France, Britain, Israel, Tunisia, Iran, German, Turkey, Poland, Italy, Russia, Brazil, Bulgaria, Swiss, Canada, and the US (Saar 2014, Kelly 2011, Smith 2012). The main agenda of Femen is to fight against the flowering of sex tourism (Prymachyk, 2010), oppressive religious institutions (Wilson, 2012), and sexism and homophobia (Huffingtonpost, 2013). It upholds a motto of sextremism as a way to draw a differentiation with another similar movement that they perceived failed to carry on feminist goals (Femen, t.t.). It started with thirty Ukrainian women in 2008 (Tayler, 2013a), increasing to three hundred and twenty Ukrainian women in 2010 (Balmforth, 2010). The movement's members grew exponentially in 2013, reaching 20.000 participants in various countries globally (Tayler, 2013b).

The vast growing member bears a single goal, to bust the myth of male domination and superiority and fight to level the playing field of women's fundamental rights. In London, they cast the controversial topless protest to

denounce Islamic-based countries that they accused of oppressing women athletes from participating in the 2012 Olympics in England (Reuters, 2012). Following that, Poland also experiences Femen's wrath by the time of the 2012 Euro event. Femen-topless participants storm the match and seize the Euro trophy while making mocking gestures and bearing protest slogans painted all over their bodies. Later on, they confirmed that it was to address a protest against the legalization of prostitution as a consequence of a global event (Bond, 2012). In another part of the region, Femen also executed aggressive protests to support their young member whom the Turkish government had apprehended for posting a topless protest sign on her Facebook (BBC, 2013). The same event series also happened in Iran, where Femen members protested the veil obligation enacted by the Iranian government (Mezzofiore, 2013).

The series of aggressive protests draw attention to the movement's successful ways of differentiating itself from similar movements. They chose to draw protest more radically and aggressively amidst the global new feminism era that has been widely accepted as a feminist way of protest. Departing from this notion, we examine the enabling factor supporting Femen's durable existence from 2008 to the present. The controversial strategy social movement cast could disrupt how society perceives specific problems. Thus, it will affect the public acceptance of the strategy and movement ideology. To some extent, public opinion seldom favors the radical movement that fails to grasp the gravity of the societal problem, resulting in the short duration of the movement. In the Femen case, using the body as a protest tool challenges the accepted interpretation of the woman's body. However, the Femen movements are able to sustain themselves for years despite the nature of the radical movement. In the next section, I will discuss sextremism as the ideological basis of the movement.

### **Femen's Sextremism Ideology**

As a social movement, Femen had a unique particular ideological basis that they interpreted as sextremism. Sextremism is basically utilizing sexuality as a weapon of protest to fight discrimination against women (Shevchenko, 2013a). They paved the way for weaponizing sexuality by exploiting women's bodies to gain the maximum effect of their movement. It was then concluded as

sextremism, some sort of radical feminist manifesto to counter the patriarchal social system and previous feminist interpretations.

Basically, the ideology consists of declarations to fight three prominent oppressive actors: dictatorship, oppressive religious institutions, and the sex industry (Shevchenko, 2013a). In many interviews, Inna Shevchenko and Aleksandra Shevchenko often express their opinion on how the three elements are intertwined with oppressed women. A dictatorship is a tool for enslaving women; for this reason, we are a democratic movement (Shevchenko, 2013a). This statement illuminates how the founder of Femen encapsulate their position in the face of political structure. The Femen leader considered their act as a democratic movement, which meant to liberate women from the oppression of dictatorship. It resembles the idea of radical democracy, which is perceived as a participatory and non-hierarchical social structure where people stand equal and contribute equally to the social process (King & Land, 2018). To this point, it is safe to conclude that the first part of Femen's sextremism ideology is to resemble a radical democratic movement that seeks to dethrone the dictatorship that oppressed women.

To give it a context, the first part of the sextremist ideology was to respond and encapsulate the authoritarianism they perceived consistently cast by Vladimir Putin in Russia, Angela Merkel in German, and Yanukovich in Ukraine. Putins was demonized due to his decision to ban homosexuality in Russia back in 2014 (Bennet, 2014). At the same time, Merkel was condemned for not legalizing same-sex marriage in 2015 (Kirschbaum, 2015). On the other hand, Yanukovich was accused of being authoritarian since he dragged Ukraine out of the European Union treaty to Russia's shadow under Putin (Bacchi, 2013).

The second part of sextremism dwells in the notion of criticizing religious institutions. Femen also draw their line along to detach themselves from religiosity. They perceived both religious teaching and practice are variously discriminating against women. One time they detached themselves from the accusations of Islamophobia by stating that they do not just anti-Islam or Christianity; they were anti-all religious teaching and practice (Shevchenko, 2013b). To strengthen the image of the atheist movement, they often posted critical opinions on the religious practice on their website. On 26 December 2017, they wrote a controversial title, "Alisa Vinogradova is Held Hostage by Religion,"

following the detainment of one of their activist in the Vatican (Femen, 2017a). Months before that, they posted an image of a bare-breasted woman holding the US flag with the text "religion kills" on her chest (Femen, 2017b). In lieu of that, Femen founder once wrote,

*"I celebrate women's rights, creativity, strength and solidarity - and denounce the greatest obstacle for feminism which is organised religions. Every day, words pronounced in the Vatican, in Mecca, in Jerusalem, in churches, mosques and synagogues across the world emphasize women's inferiority." (Shevchenko, 2017c).*

It was as a response to the accusation of Islamophobic movements by their former member Amina Sboui. In one interview, she denounced Femen and accused them of being Islamophobic due to their shouting and chanting Amina Akbar, Femen Akbar, in front of the Tunisian embassy in Paris (AFP, 2013). In the same event, they were also criticized for burning the tawhid flag as a rhetoric protest symbol (France24, 2013). Since then, Femen actively shifted their narrative to criticize various religions for detaching themselves from Islamophobic accusations. Here, we conclude that the second aspect of sextremism denounces religion or might as well be labeled as an atheistic movement.

The last part of sextremism is the sex industry, which they condemned to be the source of women's objectification and led to women suffering. The 2008 event of prostitution legalization heavily influences their views during the 2008 Euro Football Cup. Inna Shevchenko once declared that "the third element of the patriarchy is the sex industry, which has been responsible for women's sexual servitude and is, in fact, the most ancient form of female slavery (Shevchenko, 2013a)." The following piece was to condemn all forms of industry that objectified women's bodies instead of prostitution per se. Here the Femen depict themselves as a supporter of a sexuality-based movement.

To summarize, Femen favors radical democracy, atheism, and sexuality. They later combined the three elements of what they perceived as sextremism and shaped their view of constructing a strategy to wage war against patriarchy.

In the next section, I will elaborate on how the sextremism ideology is fundamental to the Femen vision of women's bodies.

### **Women's Body as A Protest Weapon**

The sextremism later translated into a gender war, where they articulated it by perceiving protesting as a simulation of war, the gendered one. The protester plays the role of a soldier that needs to face the targeted object face to face (Shevchenko, 2013d). The vies originated from radical democratic views that believe in no hierarchy should be installed into the social structure. Thus, in the oppressive hierarchical structure like nowadays, they seek to destroy or at least deconstruct the broken system. Therefore, a soldier-like perspective is deemed significant to the root cause of the movements. Alexandra Shevchenko, the cofounder of Femen, once stated, " You are not a model, you are not gonna show how beautiful you are, you are a soldier (Shevchenko, 2013d). Quoting the same source, Alexandra Shevchenko gives a predicate as a soldier of feminism to the Femen member when they are doing the protest.

Imagining the role of the conventional soldier, they are going to need to face the enemy face to face to spread the message of egalitarianism in their sense. That way, the possible tool to attack in a close rage "combat" is one-on-one contact. Thus, their own body becomes a weapon of choice for this group. The body was then used as a canvas to write their political demand and voice their objection to the targeted object. They are claimed to show an aggressive, screaming body instead of a passive smiling one (Farzan, 2018).

The root reason to use women's bodies as a political protest tool, or weapon in the case of Femen, can be traced into two reasons. The first is a result of the translation of their ideology, and the second is to utilize the social construction around their body to counterattack the patriarchal social system around the women's bodies. Femen's sextremism assumes that there is a war going on between the patriarch and Femen in both discursive and practical ways. Thus, they must prepare their best-owned weapon, the body (Shevchenko, 2013e).

Femen's idea of weaponizing women's bodies was related to how they perceived sexuality embedded in the social constructions of women's bodies. They are basically embracing the potential objectification of women's bodies and

how society treats women's bodies as sex objects (Shevchenko, 2013e). Here we can draw a line of differentiation between Femen and other gender movements. While other gender-based social movement tries to protect women's sexuality by separating it from the oppressor's range (Connell, 2013), on the contrary, Femen aims to take sexuality into their own hands and turn it against their enemy (Shevchenko, 2013e). It departs from the notion that women's objectification is inevitable in recent social construction. As a result, Femen started to draw their position here to formulate a sexual counterattack. They defined themselves as a special force of feminism, its spearhead militant unit, the modern incarnation of fearless and free Amazons (Femen, t.t.).

In the current patriarchal society, the idea of sexuality should follow the masculine standard, which is entitled to be trendy, fashionable, and designed to attract the male gaze (O'keefee, 2014). The notion of sexuality is dragged to tail the logic of phallus under the phallogocentrism ideology (Cixous, 1981). Falogocentrism derived from Derrida's point of logocentrism, where the value and meaning of a woman's body are determined by how attractive it is to the phallus. Hence it is considered as the other in the social structure (Tong, 1998). The postmodern feminism approach adopted phallogocentrism and behaved entirely differently. They firmly believe that women's body falls under the logic of phallogocentrism that situates women's body as a private object. There is a limited space for women to utilize their bodies, as well as their sexuality. The only acceptable definition of a woman's body is to be sexual within range of their male counterpart or in order to seduce the phallus (O'kefee, 2014).

Femen's protest strategy withdrew from the notion of phallogocentrism. They are aware of the existence of logical realms of phallogocentrism, yet strategically utilize their body to counter the patriarch logic. They are transforming female sexual subordination into aggression, thereby starting the actual war (Shevchenko, 2013b). They chose the public face of the movement to fit into common sexuality that was often desired by the phallus, a high-fashioned model, primarily white, with long blonde hair, able-bodied, conventionally attractive, with striking facial features and toned, slender, hairless bodies (O'keefee, 2014). In other words, they chose a pop-star look-alike to be the face of their movements (Zychowicz, 2011). However, instead of using it as a sex objectification, they turn the table with a painted protest topless body, exposing



women's breasts that, for common phallus standard, is sexual. Deconstructing the meaning of women's bodies by weaponizing them to strike at the fundamental values of patriarchal culture.

The strategy has proven shocking to the public and gained international recognition. Back in 2013, the infamous picture of Putin's glaring eyes and Merkel's surprised face became an international sensation. They were caught off guard by Femen, that deployed their topless protest strategy. In that famous photograph, Putin and Merkel were intercepted by two naked protesters that had "fuck the dictator" text painted on their bare breasts (Connolly, 2013). Using nudity as a protest strategy is firmly powerful in sending a message to the public. The strength lies in the ability to disrupt sacrosanct dichotomies of public/private and visible/hidden, naked bodies constitute a uniquely explosive site of protest (Eleraas, 2014).

In the recent event, Femen keeps gaining international attention. In September 2022, Femen still actively engaged in the global protest following the death of Mahsa Amini, a journalist that had been shot down by Iranian morality policy days before (REFRL, 2023). Before that, in August 2022, Femen activist repeated their attack on Germany's Chancellor, Olaf Scholz, instead of the German's slow response to detach from Russian gas dependency (Neplii, 2022). The latest issue involved a Femen activist protest in Spain following the murder of eight Spanish women (Kwai and Bautista, 2023). Despite the pandemic, Femen still gained existence prior to joining the global protest on the rise of domestic violence amidst the pandemic in late 2020 (PBS, 2020).

The sequence proves Femen's existence to the current day despite their protest strategy against the typical norm. However, their methods generate a bunch of backlashes. For instance, they were accused of reinforcing a more western-centric beauty standard, potentially drawing another layer of discrimination against the non-westerner, predominantly Muslim community (Gheno, 2015; Kolsy, 2013). The pop-star look-alike figure also marks the critic's points of the movements. They were once again accused of being western-centric by choosing a particular type of physical feature to represent their political movement (Eileraas, 2014). In response to that biased western accusation, Femen pointed out that there were happening all across the globe with many different races, cultures, and bodily experiences of women (Aitkenhead, 2013).

Despite the critics, Femen's strategy had persisted since 2009, when they first launched their debut. Here we conclude that part of it was because of the controversial approach to deconstructing the discourse around women's bodies that keeps capturing international attention. Judging from the foundation of the ideology, Femen successfully translated extreme gender ideology into practical action. In the long run, they have been strongly internalized by the member of the movements. It helps foster movement direction to strengthen their aims to fight oppressors as written in their manifesto. In the next section, we will discuss Femen's organizational culture, which firmly supports their existence.

### **Femen's Firm Organization Culture**

In addition to being ideologically firm, Femen is also known for its militancy. They do not hesitate to enter into some hostile situation involving a security officer and military while holding a grudge against their target. From a social movement point of view, the sense of militancy is an excellent sign of how strong and loyal the members are to the cause of the movement. Not many social movements can maintain fluidity and have a well-organized movement simultaneously. The trajectory of social movement is usually characterized by ambiguity and unpredictability within the movements (Tilly et al. 2019). Also, identity is sometimes fluid and unstable (Margadant, 1998).

In the case of Femen, they established their identity in a more organized situation with widely structured activities that strengthened the bond beneath. It departs from the soldier-like perception, bringing up the urgency to follow a single command line. Consequently, there is an urgent need to get organized and prepare physically and morally to wage war with their enemy. Inna Shevchenko stated that you could not do an action as we did to Putin or climb up the top of the building in Davos in the World Economic Forum with preparation (BBC Newsnight, 2013). While explaining this, Shevchenko was in the middle of a sit-up with her fellow Femen activist. They are doing it accordingly and coordinatedly in the Femen headquarters in Paris. Because most of Femen's protest activities involve heavy physical activities, she explains that it is a consequence of waging war on their enemies.

Through this coordinated physical activity, they hope to redefine nudity; instead of eroticism, nakedness is perceived as aggression to the established

structure, and the breast becomes a weapon. In the same video, Shevchenko also detailed their technique of the protest. The activists must remove their clothes and run toward the targeted actions. However, she stated, they need to scream at the top of their lung to spread the message while the police officer apprehends them. In the same video, they also exercise a role play in which the scenario is a confrontation with the police officers (BBC Newsnight, 2013). In addition to that, they were also held physical and emotional training on how to run, how to fall down, how to act under stress, and how to act in custody (Boghani, 2012).

The set of training is what sets Femen apart from other gender-based movement. Following Tilly's proposition that social movements are often fluid and organized, Femen has maintained their fluidity with no entire hierarchy and balanced their organized side with proper protest training for new recruits. It makes a difference in terms of organizing a social movement to objections towards particular issues. The pattern fits to the characteristic of a new social movement in which the fuel is some intangible idea of collectiveness identity. The idea of a new social movement revolves around recognition and the quest to search for a new identity and lifestyle instead of being bonded by material or political interests (Polleta & Jasper, 2001). However, the only hitch is that there is a tiny line that distinguishes people from joining social movements because of their interests or because they feel responsible for a substantial social change (Jasper, 2008).

The women's movement can not be understood from the formal institution to ensure that the collective identity is strongly forged. It needs to go deeper into the construction of the collective identity by investigating how the social and informal ties through network and community are happening (Whittiers, 1995). In this sense, to comprehend the whole matter, the assessment of the women's movement can not be limited to the event of a protest. The social ties, the networking outside movement, and the community matter. Thus, following the footstep of Whittier's arguments, assessing the Femen movement needs to go deeper into the prior protest stage. It gives a deeper meaning to the soldier-like training as activities that forged a more profound connection, alliance, and sense of community to the member of the Femen, besides their tactical purposes. It concludes the second part of how Femen can endure the last

decade deploying aggressive and militant naked protest by establishing a balance of fluidity and firm social culture in everyday activities.

## Conclusion

Femen has been debated matters since their first debut deploying naked protests in 2009. As much as controversy follows their footstep, they remain a sustainable social movement in which they can endure organizing naked protests amidst the critics. Having it examined, we can safely conclude that sustainable movements depart from the ability to execute a firm ideological stance and organizational culture. The ideological context later constructed how they perceived the meaning and value of women's bodies, translating it into a protest strategy that utilized women's bodies as a sign of protest. The idea revolves around a strike to reveal the private body to counter the typical construction of sexual women's bodies imposed by phallogocentrism logic.

To supplement the ideological struggle, Femen also established a firm and organized community culture between members. Their soldier-like take on the movement does not blur the essence of community. They prevailed in successfully establishing a strong community connection using routine soldier-like physical training before protesting. Despite the controversy that follows, from the social movement perspective, Femen is an intriguing form of women's movement that detach from the typical pattern of similar movements. With the sustainability of the movement, the exponential sympathizer growth, and the series of international incidents involving women, we can expect them to exist for some time as long as they can maintain the movement's momentum.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the Center for Identity and Urban Studies colleagues for providing critical discussion for this research.

## Funding Statements

The author received no funding for this research.

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