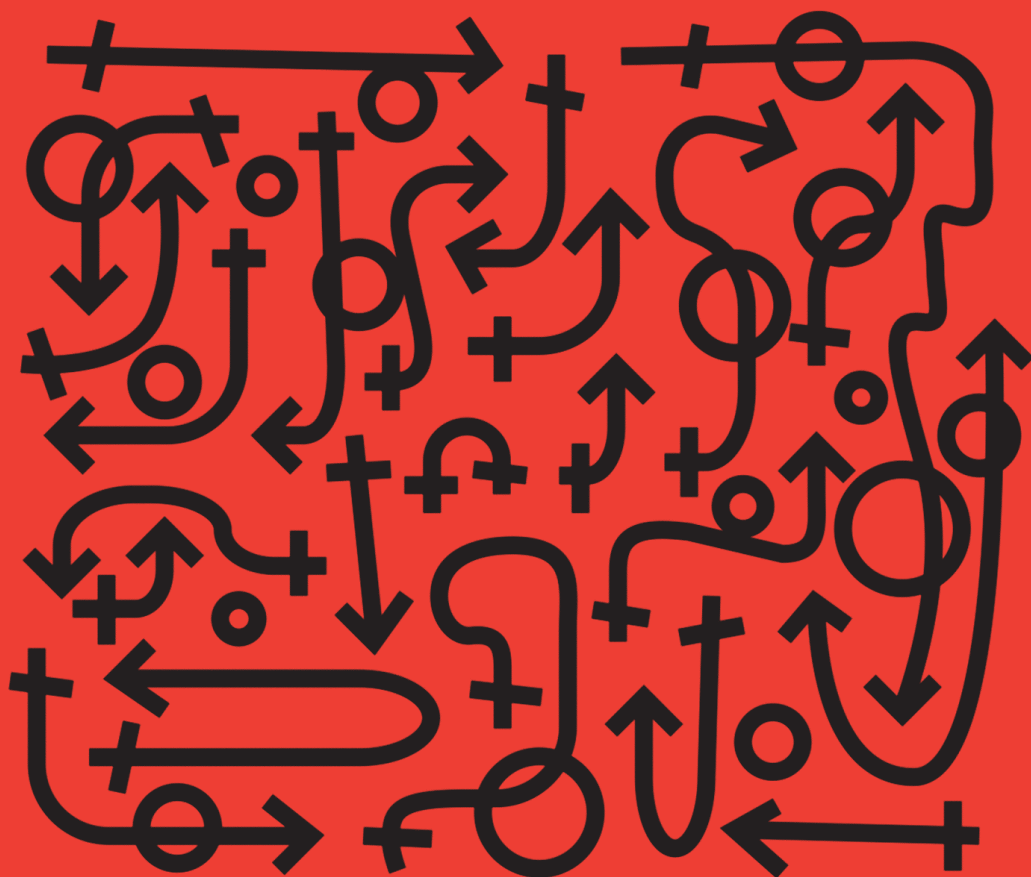


GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2015

Sexual rights and the internet



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
AND HUMANIST INSTITUTE FOR COOPERATION WITH DEVELOPING COUNTRIES (Hivos)

Global Information Society Watch 2015

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Editor

Alan Finlay

Assistant editor, publication production

Lori Nordstrom (APC)

Proofreading

Valerie Dee

Stephanie Wildes

Graphic design

Monocromo

info@monocromo.com.uy

Phone: +598 2400 1685

Cover illustration

Matias Bervejillo

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Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos)

Hivos

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Maria M. Pasholok

Introduction

The image of young, blonde Ukrainian women with half-naked bodies and sexual rights slogans painted on their breasts has become one of the most recognisable and scandalous phenomena worldwide in recent years. They are Femen,¹ one of the best-known feminist carnivalesque protest groups, founded in Ukraine to fight for sexual equality and sexual and political freedoms.

Despite the obviously provocative component of their spectacular protests (or even performances?), the group largely owes its worldwide popularity to new media and the internet. For example, in 2010 Google searches for “Femen” had surpassed searches for “feminism” and “sextremism” (a term coined by the group leaders).² Focusing on Femen in my report, and especially on their idea of promoting revolutionary sexuality as opposed to the patriarchal eroticism and pornography found on the internet, I would like to discuss the broader context of sexual rights in the Ukraine – a country of Soviet heritage whose citizens “endure regular discrimination and violence for which there is rarely accountability.”³

I will especially focus on the violence and abuse that Femen has to face during each of their public appearances, and the way the group deals with it online.

Policy and political background

Human Rights Watch regularly reports on violations of sexual rights in the Ukraine in its yearly World

Reports. 2014 raised perhaps the biggest concern in legal terms as two homophobic bills were pending in parliament, proposing fines or a prison sentence of up to six years for the production, publication or distribution of materials aimed at the “promotion” of homosexuality among children.⁴ The same year, Rada – the Ukrainian parliament – twice postponed consideration of amendments to the Labour Code protecting against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation.

All this happened at the time of a serious political and military crisis that is still unfolding in Ukraine as a result of the 2014 Euromaidan movement⁵ which led to the re-election of parliament and the annexation of the Crimean peninsula by Russia in March 2014.⁶

It is important to understand that the Euromaidan movement in Ukraine started as a desire among citizens of the country to join the European Union (EU). The EU requires Ukraine to adopt comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation on sexual rights, and so the sexual rights agenda in Ukraine during that time became highly politicised. Femen took an active part in these processes. Notably, the range of issues addressed by the movement also grew, and now started to include a lot of different political statements.

A new kind of radical feminism

In February 2008 a group of half-naked Ukrainian women protested against sexism in Ukrainian universities by re-enacting X-rated provocative scenes of sexual inequality in the classroom. This example is only one of the numerous protests organised by

1 femen.org

2 The term “sextremism” is believed to combine three related concepts: sexism, extremism, and feminism. It was used in Femen’s manifesto, but has not gone far beyond the group’s own vocabulary. Some experts tend to understand it as an extreme form of feminism.

3 The most recent example was the Kyiv Equality March that took place in June 2015, and was followed by violent attacks in which nearly two dozen police officers and participants were injured. See Human Rights Watch. (2015, 5 August). *Joint Letter to the President of Ukraine on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity as Grounds of Non-Discrimination in the Constitution*. www.hrw.org/news/2015/08/05/joint-letter-president-ukraine-sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity-grounds-non

4 Human Rights Watch (2014). *World Report 2014: Ukraine*. www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/ukraine

5 A political movement that was part of the Ukrainian crisis of 2013-2014, and which called for the country to join the European Union and for the resignation of President Viktor Yanukovich.

6 The Euromaidan protests lasted for three months, from December 2013 to March 2014. The protests reached a climax on 18-20 February, when police and protesters fired guns, and several people were killed on both sides. Following these tragic events, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich promised the opposition and the people to end the crisis, having signed an agreement on the settlement of the political crisis. However, in spite of the agreement, people of the Euromaidan claimed they would engage in armed conflict if Yanukovich did not resign by 10:00 a.m. 21 February. The next day, Yanukovich was removed from office by parliament, and the government was replaced with a pro-European one.

Femen since 2008, when their organisation was founded by Hanna Hutsol.

At the moment, Femen are a well-known yet unregistered group of female protesters, who regularly go topless with traditional Ukrainian flower garlands in their hair, wear knickers made from surgical masks, and even mud-wrestle naked to draw attention to their cause. The group has about 400 members, all with Ukrainian backgrounds, located across the world. They are in their 20s, look like models, and have all gone to university. Hutsol is still the ideological leader of Femen and takes care of the group's management, logistics and financial and creative concerns, as well as developing ideas and designs for the new protests.

From the very first protests, the media claimed Femen was the advent of a new kind of radical feminism "causing outrage among feminists and traditionalists alike."⁷ Hutsol has made it clear that Femen's main motive is to highlight the negative impact that sex tourism and prostitution have had on the Ukraine since the fall of the Soviet Union. However, she has chosen to address this in a very unusual manner.

Tracking Femen's activities on the internet since their formation in 2008, I have noticed several highly creative and unexpected methods with which the women address their chosen topics.

For example, they start their manifesto in a pseudo-Biblical style, hinting at the universality of their approach:

In the beginning, there was the body, feeling of the woman's body, feeling of joy because it is so light and free. Then there was injustice, so sharp that you feel it with your body, it immobilizes the body, hinders its movements, and then you find yourself your body's hostage. And so you turn your body against this injustice, mobilizing every body's cell to struggle against the patriarchy and humiliation. You tell the world: Our God is a Woman!⁸

What follows is a touch of romanticism:

FEMEN is an international women's movement of brave topless female activists painted with the slogans and crowned with flowers.⁹

Moving on towards a clear and bold political statement:

We live in the world of male economic, cultural and ideological occupation. In this world, a woman is a slave, she is stripped of the right to any property but above all she is stripped of ownership of her own body. All functions of the female body are harshly controlled and regulated by patriarchy. Separated from the woman, her body is an object to monstrous patriarchal exploitation, animated by production of heirs, surplus profits, sexual pleasures and pornographic shows.¹⁰

And ending with an original and highly creative message:

FEMEN's naked attack is a naked nerve of the historic woman-system conflict, its most visual and appropriate illustration. Activist's naked body is the undisguised hatred toward the patriarchal order and new aesthetics of women's revolution.¹¹

We can see that Femen have a strong and well-thought-out agenda, the group using their bodies as a means of political activism. The images of these bodies became viral on social media, making the girls recognisable and famous. These steps were "inevitable", in the words of the group's organisers, in order for them to be heard.

One of Femen's leaders, Inna Shevchenko, admitted in an interview in *The Guardian* that no one had been listening before they started stripping off. "At the beginning, we were not protesting topless but we realised we had to do something really radical. We don't have people to promote or help us, or big money. Everywhere – from TV channels to magazines – you see naked girls selling something. We are trying to say: 'You should not show your body like that; you should use it to protest and fight.'"¹²

Such a perspective has not only resulted in various responses from the public, but has also at times placed the topless women in real danger. In December 2011 several Femen activists protested against long-serving Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko. The young women wearing Lukashenko style moustaches had red stars painted on their chests and bellies alongside the slogans "Freedom to Political Prisoners" and "Long Live Belarus". Soon afterwards the three Femen women and a

7 Khaleeli, H. (2011, 15 April). The nude radicals: feminism Ukrainian style. *The Guardian*. . www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2011/apr/15/ukrainian-feminists-topless-campaign

8 femen.org/about

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*

12 Khaleeli, H. (2011, 15 April). *Op. cit.*

photographer who accompanied them during the Minsk protest went missing. Later it was revealed that the women were kidnapped by six unknown men, who Femen claimed were Belarusian secret police. They took the women to the forest, made them strip, cut their hair short and threatened to kill them.¹³ Afterwards the women were found and brought to Ukraine safely; however, this incident proved in a paradoxical way that what Femen were fighting against was the reality of post-Soviet everyday life.

The incident indeed made them famous worldwide. From 2011 on, Femen started protesting weekly, addressing almost any topic that they considered worthy of public response. And every time, the public response online was immediate.

It is important to understand that Femen rely on the media for exposure – it serves their advocacy purpose when their protests are recorded and make the front pages. The media spectacle that is the result of their protests is as much a part of their advocacy agenda as the public symbolism of their naked bodies. From the start the media recorded and tried to explain the actions of the young female activists. Alongside coverage of the protests, they have also taken an interest in the everyday lives of the activists – in this way showing that the protests are the actions of normal, everyday people.

A Reuters photographer, Gleb Garanich, who had been photographing Femen for five years, says that they do not seem to be extraordinary at all: “I think they are normal girls with normal problems, ideas and ideals who manage to break out of the routine and desperation during their protests, which sets them apart from many others who have moved to Kiev from smaller cities and towns.”¹⁴

And paradoxically, this normality makes them strong. As Garanich says, “They have done more for Ukraine and its European aspirations than all the politicians and all the expensive adverts ordered by the government.”¹⁵

Conclusions

The Femen phenomenon will by no means become the rule in the global fight for sexual rights. On the contrary, the movement follows an exceptional strategy that cannot be generalised. In fact, many

feminist scholars even refuse to see Femen as a part of the global feminism movement, because the group goes far beyond “acceptable” feminist practices.¹⁶

On the other hand, the group has recently started employing more traditional methods in their protests. For example, Femen is taking part in an International Feminist Training Camp in France in August 2015,¹⁷ and, importantly, they will not be employing nudity.

Recent years have seen the spread of the Femen movement beyond the borders of post-Soviet states. By the end of 2012 the group claimed it had about 40 activists in Ukraine, and another 100 all over Europe. In October 2013, from their headquarters in Paris,¹⁸ Femen announced that the organisation had officially opened its Turkey office, and was hoping to establish a “homegrown” branch in the United Kingdom.¹⁹ But still their largest support base is online, with as many as 20,000 supporters in the Russian social network Vkontakte²⁰ and more than 30,000 on Facebook²¹ – and the numbers keep growing, with more supporters declaring themselves Femen internet activists.

Despite the many social stigmas that surround Femen, the group has now generated significant social capital with which it is able to advocate for sexual rights via the internet without putting their activists in actual danger. While Femen’s unorthodox tactics may still prevent them from cooperating with other activists, who might see the group as a distraction – a show for the sake of the show – their contribution to sexual rights activism in Ukraine and worldwide cannot be ignored. As anthropologist Jessica Zychowicz suggests, “Perhaps we have a lot left to learn from Femen as their movement changes and they learn from themselves; continuing to embed their words, their images, and their bodies in history.”²²

13 RT. (2011, 21 December). First FEMEN images after alleged KGB torture. RT. www.rt.com/news/kgb-protests-belarus-femen-337

14 Garanich, G. (2012, 1 March). The femem phenomenon. *Photographers Blog*. blogs.reuters.com/photographers-blog/2012/03/01/the-femen-phenomenon

15 Ibid.

16 See the relevant discussion in Zychowicz, J. (2011). Two Bad Words: FEMEN and Feminism in Independent Ukraine. *The Anthropology of East Europe Review*, 29(2), 215-227. scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/aeer/article/view/1266/1336

17 Débat d'idées – International Feminist Training Camp, 29-30 August 2015. www.eventbrite.fr/e/debat-didees-international-feminist-training-camp-2015-tickets-18190798167?aff=affiliate1

18 The group relocated after being unwelcome in the Ukraine, and also in order to establish a more international presence.

19 Holman, Z. (2013, 19 October). Fearless ... and topless: Femen activists to bring 'sextrémism' to the UK. *The Guardian*. www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/20/femen-activists-uk-branch-feminism

20 vk.com/club2672464

21 www.facebook.com/FEMEN.International.Official

22 Zychowicz, J. (2011). Op. cit.

Action steps

Taking the above into account, I can suggest the following advocacy steps for internet activists in the Ukraine and worldwide who would like to learn from Femen, the world's most provocative and arguably most visible sexual rights organisation. This might look like advice on how to successfully market yourself. However, one of the main lessons Femen has taught us is that modern activism, whether on behalf of a charity or a political organisation, is highly dependent on the mass media, both online and offline. It is therefore necessary to consider how to tailor your advocacy message so that it grabs the media's attention.

- *Choose just one target at a time.* The number of advocacy issues you take on can increase in the future once you are successful with the first one you have selected. Femen started with just sexual rights as their key concern, and only then expanded their advocacy concerns to include human rights and other political issues.
- *Be simple and original.* That does not necessarily mean being provocative. Arguably the Femen phenomenon received the kind of attention it did because the public meaning they created was easy to understand, and the expression of this meaning using their naked bodies was original.
- *Reflect content in form.* By using their bodies as symbols of protest, Femen represented women everywhere who had experienced violations of their sexual rights. In this way they gained trust.
- *Be smart and clear.* Most Femen activists have a higher education, some even two university degrees. They have a very clear message on their website, connecting their movement to the past and the future, cleverly referencing source material that shows they are well-educated and analytical in their approach.

Sexual rights and the internet

The theme for this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) is sexual rights and the online world. The eight thematic reports introduce the theme from different perspectives, including the global policy landscape for sexual rights and the internet, the privatisation of spaces for free expression and engagement, the need to create a feminist internet, how to think about children and their vulnerabilities online, and consent and pornography online.

These thematic reports frame the 57 country reports that follow. The topics of the country reports are diverse, ranging from the challenges and possibilities that the internet offers lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) communities, to the active role of religious, cultural and patriarchal establishments in suppressing sexual rights, such as same-sex marriage and the right to legal abortion, to the rights of sex workers, violence against women online, and sex education in schools. Each country report includes a list of action steps for future advocacy.

The timing of this publication is critical: many across the globe are denied their sexual rights, some facing direct persecution for their sexuality (in several countries, homosexuality is a crime). While these reports seem to indicate that the internet does help in the expression and defence of sexual rights, they also show that in some contexts this potential is under threat – whether through the active use of the internet by conservative and reactionary groups, or through threats of harassment and violence.

The reports suggest that a radical revisiting of policy, legislation and practice is needed in many contexts to protect and promote the possibilities of the internet for ensuring that sexual rights are realised all over the world.

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