

## ***Analysing 'sextremism': transnational trajectories of a FEMEN-ist idea.***

### **Introduction**

This paper starts from the curiosity that arose in me to understand better a group of Ukrainian activists and their political message beyond and behind their performances. The group formed in 2008 to protest against political corruption, the sex-industry and prostitution. They gained visibility by stripping bare-breasted and started to expand the target of their protests to the 'patriarchal pillars of society', including dictatorship and religion. Since then their profile and activities increased pointing at both Ukraine's political system, they also started targeting other global issues, such as violence against women, the exploitation of women sexuality by the advertising industry, or oppression of women by religions. Following the cutting down of an Orthodox cross in Kiev, an action to protest against Pussy Riots imprisonment in Russia, Inna Shevchenko, one of the leaders of the group had to leave Ukraine, also facing imprisonment. She moved to France, Paris, where very quickly she set up the group Femen International.

Following Levitt and Nieves (2011) paper on social remittances, I would employ the idea that migrant practices and identities are inherently cultural even more when they are directed towards activism. A certain way of researching transnational activities is to identify and describe all those forms and processes, discourses, material flows and cultural interaction that are produced and exchanged across borders (Levitt and Kahagram, 2007). Here the interest is on what is circulating, how these ideas or even material thing are moving, and why some ideas and practices take roots and are reproduced, while others go unnoticed.

**The main hypothesis in this paper will be to understand the trajectory of Femen, to discover what ideas and values travel with them, how they travel and what is created from it.**

This is of course only a very limited research, that does not leave space to many other questions, which could have similar relevance, such as: is Femen a feminist movement and if so, how is it contributing to develop feminism? Or how is Femen using the mass media industry and to what extent is used by them? To what extent iconic images are helpful in promoting a political message? and when does the image overcome the content?

Unfortunately this cannot be addressed here. Nonetheless there will be an attempt to draw the socio-historical conditions that led to the formation of Femen and to address the social problems that the group is concerned with. Moreover is necessary to add that I will mainly adopt Femen's perspective, quoting them at length, to better understand their position within the global context of feminism.

**The effect of the transition on Eastern women: looking forward to old traditions.**

The case of post-soviet countries has been investigated since the 1990s. Many women's movements with more or less feminist stances tried to gain popularity and relevance but without much success (Bystydzienski, 2001). In fact during the first decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union and with it the collapse of an entire way of thinking about society, a wave of conservatism has swept through Eastern and Central European countries (Kay, 2002). This was a reaction against a totalitarian system that had its origins in deeply rooted patriarchal attitudes, and also a rejection of every ideology imposed from without (Feber et al, 2003). Out of the whole population women are those that suffered most, both from the lack of political representation and from the loss of the majority of social support services and rights (Kay, 2002). This happened in a context where all – excluding those underground (Solidarnosc) – grass roots women's movements were controlled by the communist, therefore dismantled after the collapse of the Union (Bystydzienski, 2001). Women were indeed deprived of their voices in a moment when they needed it most. Policy makers could implement policies that were said to be benefiting women but in reality were driven by economic interest (Bystydzienski, 2001). The manipulation of women's role in society was applied under communism as well, but covered up by a rhetoric of equality. After the collapse even this rhetoric disappeared and all that was left in many countries was plain sexism and overt segregation – in fact 'the need to pay lip service to an ideological commitment to women's full participation in the labour force and public life was gone' (Kay, 2002:57).

**Ukraine and the birth of FEMEN**

To understand the cultural background of the group there will be a brief excursus in the history of gender discourse and women's movements in Ukraine. This will help in the development of an analysis of 'what' travels with FEMEN. What is their cultural heritage, what are the discourses that are deeply engrained in the history of the group but also in the biography of its founders.

In 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union women in Ukraine went through a period of self-identification with neotraditional ideology in a move to complete the rejection of their communist past. Many of the women's groups started to protest before the collapse against the regime, after which they promoted themselves as bearers of democratic values (Rubcach, 2012). But most of this rhetoric was related to old symbols of Ukraine, revisited and changed to fit the circumstances, called "Berehyna", which literally means 'earth mother' (Rubchak, 2012).

At the same time, the collapse of a dictatorship and the move towards a democratic society – with all its limitations such as the lack of women's participation in the political arena – opened up a

window for self-identification for women (Rubchak, 2012). In this window two women's movements developed – the first wave, led by conservatism – but the second one – led by a radicalism that represents a strong generational break. Important to mention is the so called Orange Revolution in 2004, where civil society rose to demand more democracy. Something similar is happening now in Ukraine where a big part of the population is asking the government to strengthen the relations with the European Union.

This new wave is pulled forward by a group called Femen. Femen's mission in their own words as written in their Manifesto is “[..] to ideologically undermine the fundamental institutes of patriarchy - dictatorship, sex-industry, and church – by putting these institutes through subversive trolling to force them to strategic surrender” (Femen.org).

This part of their Manifesto already implies that the group is looking at a international arena, or even a global one. In fact to attack patriarchy means to attack an ideological system that is hegemonic on multiple levels: economic, cultural, political and social (cit.).

The group has started their activities as a group of young women in Ukraine, a new generation of University students, grown up in an extremely masculine, sexist and corrupted society. Some of their early protest in fact addressed the problem of sexual favours within Higher Education institutions, the excessive grow of the sex-industry that was going on silently and government corruption (Rubchak, 2012).

### **Transnational political activist and migrants: FEMEN unbounded trajectories.**

To talk about Femen's trajectory and what travelled with it, we need to identify the main carriers of this group and its ideas. But also about how and why it got so far. At this very point I need to introduce some of the activists: Anna Hutsol the ideological leader, managing the groups protests, finance and actions; Inna Shevchenko, Oleksandra Shevchenko and Oksana Shachko the 'faces and bodies' of the movement, currently living in Paris.

The group is transnational in its essence because it is not restricted by national borders and it develops through international networks of activists. Nonetheless they are bounded by their shared values and morals. But what sort of values and morals are Femen carrying in their movements both in the physical world and virtually? How are they changed when they 'land' somewhere? Why are their actions sparking so much debate?

In an interview in 2009 Anna Hutsol offered to us in two statements a glimpse of the culture that is travelling with Femen: “Our sexy image causes debate. You need to have debate if you are ever to move forward. So many activists have no idea how to engage the media and the public. They’re

dour, uninteresting. FEMEN is the opposite of that.” (Hutsol, 2009) And more: “look, this is part of our culture. To deliberately make yourself unattractive in Ukraine is to consign yourself to the margins. That’s not what we want.” (Hutsol, 2009) Here we understand Hutsol's interest in something popular, a form of 'pop' feminism that have to replace the stereotype attached to feminists of the older generation, and that uses 'marketing' techniques to propose radical ideas. Due to their protest tactic of stripping their breast bare in public places, they had already gained some visibility in the media during the European Football Cup in 2012, during which they attacked the sex-industry and trafficking of women from the East to the West, satisfying European men's want for submissive wives and mothers.

The interest was gained thanks to this method of protest but the issues raised are really controversial. With their move to France, and the opening up of a branch of the group in Germany, Spain and Canada among other more temporary ones, Femen became a larger organization with an international breath. On the one hand, if we consider Femen activists as migrants whom had to flee Ukraine for political issues, their political action can be considered transnational. Some say that Femen International's leader Inna Shevchenko is very little interested in the country that offered her political asylum (Tayler, 2013). She doesn't speak the language and she makes no effort to shed a positive light on the country. At the same time the group carried out a number of protest in France, both at the local level (in the neighbourhood where they are located which has a predominant Muslim population), at the national level, rallying for the conviction of prostitute's customers, and at the supra-national level, carrying out protests against religious institutions (in Churches or in front of Mosques). Furthermore their actions are directed to their home countries, and can be inserted as part of a larger movement pro-Europe which has enlarged in the past two month, culminating in mass demonstration during the Christmas period of 2013 in Kiev, asking for political reforms towards transparency but also a movement that want Ukraine to get culturally closer to Europe (Kruk, 2013). During this period Femen staged a protest against Ukraine's Prime Minister (Femen.org). Moreover in 2012 Anna Hutsol launched the idea of transforming Femen in a only women political party, the first and only one of its kind in Ukraine (Prymachyk, 2010). The reason of the dropping of this project are not clear, but the fact that the group has been targeted by the national police could be part of it. This highlights the interest of the group in becoming a prominent political and radical force in their home country and abroad.

Therefore to a certain extent Femen members are taking part in transnational activities, being politically active both in their countries of origin and in their host country, communicating their ideas using ICTs and moving through informal networks of activists. It is not clear how numerous is the group in Ukraine but some stated that there are approximately 300 members (Arkhipenko,

2012). This won't represent a strong political force but it is enough to fuelled discussions and spark controversies. At the same time the core of the group in France seems to act as a platform for other groups that want to use Femen's 'brand' and protest tactic to question the patriarchal forces in their countries. Femen's leadership has been criticized for not being transparent about who finances them (Huff. Post, 2013).

Femens action in 2013 has been definitely transnational; they kept up their activities in Ukraine, protesting against corruption in parliament and more recently in support of the Euromaidan, the civil society movement in support of the economic agreement between Ukraine and the EU (Femen.org). Moreover they protested against the Pope in the Vatican, they attacked several political figures such as Italy ex-Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and Russian President Vladimir Putin. They rallied in support of same-sex marriage law in France, they interrupted several fashion show to denounce the inhumanity of the fashion industry, one activist interrupted the Christmas Mass in Germany with the slogan 'I am God' written on her chest, and several members of Femen are protesting against the restriction on the abortion law proposed by right wing politicians in Spain (Femen.org). One of their most international action so far is their 'Topless Jihad' that took place in Paris, Stockholm, Milan, and Kiev in April to support Amina Sboui (also called by Western newspapers Amina Tyler), Tunisian member of the group. The attack against Amina was sparked by some pictures posted on a social networks showing the topless woman, while she smoked a cigarette reading a book. Written on her chest there were the words 'My body my rules. Fuck your morals'. Her picture was followed by others, until the Facebook group of Femen Tunisia was hacked and the pictures substituted by Quoranic verses (Femen.org). Moreover a Salafist Imam condemned Amina and asked for her persecution. Femen reacted by burning a Salafist flag in front of a Mosque in Paris they have been accused of Islamophobia by the Muslim and non-Muslim world, as well as of carrying out a form of culturally imperialistic feminism that crystallize Muslim women as the complicit victims of male oppression. Femen campaign to 'liberate' Muslim women from the oppression of the veil and religion was followed by a counter campaign started by Muslim women all over the world following the Twitter hash tag #MuslimahPride (Al-Jazeera, 2013). The action and reaction of this particular campaign were propelled globally by internet communication and social networks it was transmitted by some of the most important main-stream mass media, from the BBC to Al-Jazeera.

### **Sextremism and feminism: East meets West?**

Femen claims to have developed a new form of resistance to patriarchal power, that is 'sextremism' or in other words to use 'breasts as weapons', and body as the carrier of political messages.

The context in which Femen operates is the global –borderless- context of the mass media and internet. In this context third wave feminist critique has developed against the objectification of women's bodies where 'hotness becomes cultural currency' (Sobchack in Woodward et al, 2009) and extremely sexualized or pornographic images are everywhere (North, 2004). Within this discourse Femen's tactic becomes ineffective since 'as women are increasingly made visible in a sexualized way they also simultaneously made invisible as the process of proliferation of images of semi-naked women is one which desensitizes the viewer, such that many no longer notice or pay attention to them' (Woodward et al, 2009:124). Peggy Phelan echoing Foucault and Lacan stated: 'visibility is a trap; it summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/imperial appetite for possession.' (Phelan, 1993:6) Yet she recognizes that identity politics based on visibility retains a certain political appeal because of the presumption that increase visibility for a group represents increase in power. Nonetheless others (Alamo, 2010) suggest that the naked body protesting can be a strong drive for experiences of trans-corporeality where the nakedness embodies an 'urgent sense of conviction'. Here Femen finds a space within feminist discourse whereas the social and cultural situation in Ukraine demanded women to take extreme action if they want to be listened to. Alamo also raises another very important point for this discussion by saying that '[naked bodies] (express) an alternative ethos that acknowledges not only that discourse has material effects but that the material realm is always already imbricated with, and sometimes against, the discourse, however veiled corporeality may be' (Alamo, 2010:32).

Femen seems to be reclaiming the materiality of the body as they advocate for women's re-appropriation of their own bodies as weapon against oppression. They also have criticized Academic feminism harshly for being too far away from women's real issues. Some academic discussions have recognized the importance of women's activism. Especially when engaging in transnational exchange and international activism it is important to recognize the different path that women have been experiencing. Even equality is conceived in patriarchal terms since having a voice as a woman is only possible when you're either reduced to a feminine stereotype or speaking through the dominant masculine structures as a man (Woodward et al, 2009: 115).

From a feminist perspective post-feminism represents the example of women speaking through dominant masculine structures (mass media) and complying to the dominant masculine discourses (women have reached equality) (Crusmac, 2013). Femen's rejection of the 'old' feminism, perceived as men hater and lesbian led, fits into post-feminist culture. Also their embrace of sexualization as a mean of communication, and as an empowering tool for women is seen with a certain amount of content by most of the feminist audience. Nonetheless Femen's attacks on patriarchy are

reminiscent of 'second wave' feminism denouncing a society defined by patriarchal structures of power (Crusmac, 2013). Femen's criticism is towards dominant institutions such as the Church and government, and also towards women's oppression in everyday life.

Most importantly though the relationships between feminism from the East and from the West have been for a long time shaped by an unequal distribution of power (Cerwonka, 2008). Western feminism has been for a decade now closing more and more within the Academia, leaving little space for the direct action feminists in the '60s were preaching (Bucur, 2013). It can be argued that Femen is a reaction to this as well, since they often attack academic feminism as outdated and far from the reach of most women. Femen's methods, they argue, are not orthodox but at least the group managed to render feminism appealing for the mass again.

Since Femen went to the limelights, a number of programs have been launched to discuss the group and its action. Feminist's from all life paths have been interviewed and asked to give their opinion on this new controversial group. BBC, Al-jazeera, CNN and RT, some of the main-stream TV channels also representing different global powers, have all aired special investigations about the group or long interview with its members. This is the space where the power of shaping the discourse is exercised and discourses formed. There is also where Femen is given most visibility and also where is often discredited by the hegemonic discourse of Western feminism.

### **Femen and Sites of Encounter**

In this last part I will analyse Femen using Peggy Levitt's guidelines to study the sites of encounter of cultures on the move. According to this theory, when a culture, practice, religious belief land in a country different from the one it originates from, there are a number of factors that influence the success of this landing, which can culminate in hybridization.

The first factor is difference; the thing-idea-practice carried need to be not too different from the host society and at the same time need to have a certain amount of appeal for the 'audience', making them interested in watching, capturing their attention and being successful in delivering the message. In this sense I argue that Femen is fitting this description perfectly; in fact one the one hand they meet the erotic stereotype of attractive eastern European women satisfying the Western "male gaze". One the other, they use their attractive bodies to communicate anti-hegemonic messages, attacking male dominated institutions and discourses. This way they gain visibility (which is a trap but holds political power) and their ideas reach also a more radical public ready to pick up those messages. The second factor is the status of the carrier; in the case of Femen, the carriers of sextremism are white, University educated, young and attractive, with access to the web,

and a background that enables them to voice their concerns. At the same time they represent a group of disadvantaged Eastern European women, stripped of their political and social rights, out of which the transition period took the highest toll in terms of loss of economic, political and social independence. At the same time, they grown up with the idealized myth of the “Bereyhna” and the Amazon, the strong woman, the fighter and the beautiful. Femen's stripping is a conscious act, adopting the topless technique to express both women's lack of voice and to make women's cry heard. The third factor is packageability or in other words how easy is the idea to be packed and delivered to the audience. Femen's methods of “one-woman-protest”, which is then photographed and published on their blogs, renders the message very easily packageable. “My body is my weapon” is one of the most famous of their slogans. This materializes the ideology in the body, showing that the fight for women's freedom is taking place “in and on” the bodies. The message is feminist, and recalls feminist ideas of gender as performance (Judith Butler). The message Femen sends can be unpacked and shows a certain level of complexity.

Moreover their blog, which also is their main platform, together with their various facebook pages, is translated in three languages, Russian, English and French, reaching a quite vast readership. Once someone visits their blogs and shares their values there is nothing more than staging a protest by stripping naked required to become a member of Femen. This means that Femen is virtually open to everybody. The group is also open to male participation.

The fourth factor is frequency. The message has more chances to be effective if it is repeated over and over again. And this is what Femen is trying to do. They are targeting a vast number of issues and visibility is probably what they are looking for the most. For them is almost sure that any protest staged in critical public places, such during elections, or in the Vatican, will gain some publicity on the mass media. They also are extremely active on alternative platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs. Only in the year 2013 they presented in December a book “FEMEN”, their released the documentary 'Ukraine is Not a Brothel' that has been screened at the Venice Film Festival in September. Another fact that sparked media attention was in regards to a new stamp released in July in France. The authors of this new stamp said they were inspired by Femen activist and leader Inna Shevchenko. The stamp was presented on Bastille day, it represents Marianne a national emblem of France and an allegory of Liberty and Reason. The designer explains: “She [Inna Shevchenko] embodies the values of the [French] Republic best; liberty, equality, fraternity. Feminism is an intrinsic part of those values.” (Huff Post, 2013) This is also an example of a transnational value system. To the designers Shevchenko's national identity did not matter.

The fifth element is pathways or the networks, channels through which the idea travels. Pathways can be more or less formalized or totally informal, they can move ideas on multiple levels and be



exchanged between different groups. Femen moves mainly by using informal channels. Its members communicate mainly using Skype, and the decision making process pass entirely through the Ukrainian core Hutsol-Shevchenko. The last factor is delineated by exogenous elements, or elements that are extraneous from all the characteristics of the idea that travels. In the case of Femen exogenous elements could be media obsession with women's bodies which the group exploits to raise awareness about the objectification women's flesh in the media industry.

### **Final reflections.**

In its action Femen is raising awareness on the vulnerability of the body and exposing the violence of the power that be. Their naked stance is unveiling not only them but also the brutality of a system that oppres specially the most vulnerable, the naked ones. Nakedness is also a double edged sword. Femen is painting their breast to attract attention and at the same time, drawing the political message on the torso, is directing the attention towards gender and the inequalities engrained in the gendered body. In fact it could be argued that is gender the main identity that Femen is adopting, transcending structural differences or ethnic ones. Another bounding characteristics is also their strong atheist standpoint which alienates Femen from religious men and women. This is a self-identification, radical and currently very rare in the public sphere. Overall Femen is made up of extremely determined and brave women, moving in a fluidly in a transnational sphere and fluently interacting with modern communication media. This is possible also because of their cultural background that is of an elite of University educated young white, middle-class women. In the discussion I did not take into account the intersection of class, ethnicity and gender but focussed particularly on the latter. It could be interesting to analyse the group also utilizing an intersectional perspective. This would also fit in the theory of transnational geographies and places of encounter. To a certain extent is in Femen that old and contemporary feminism meet, to face a global media machine that dismembers and devour, in a ideological clash between capitalist and anti-capitalist forces.

**Words count: 4170** [Ref. Included]

### ***BIBLIOGRAPHY***

**Alamo S.** 2010 'The Naked Word: the trans-corporeal ethics of the protesting body' *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 20 (1): 15-36.

**Arkhipenko V.** 2012 '*Reconsidering the Conventional Private/Public Dichotomy: Examining Femen Movement through the Arendtian Lens of the Social*'. Central European University.

**Bystydzienski J. M.** 2001 'The Feminist Movement in Poland: Why So Slow?' *Women's Studies International Forum* 24(5): 501-51.

**Bucur M.** 2013 'Passing It Forward: Thought on Academic Feminists and the Future of Out Ideas' *Analyze. Journal of Gender and Feminist Studies* 1 (15): 8-16.

**Cerwonka A.** 2008 'Traveling Feminist Thought: Difference and Transculturation in Central and Eastern European Feminism' *Signs*, 33 (4): 809-832.

**Crusmac O.** 2013 'Post-feminism and Specialized Media: A Content Analysis of Cosmopolitan Headlines' *Analyze. Journal of Gender and Feminist Studies* 1 (15): 17-36.

**Feber M.A. And Raabe P.H.** 2003 'Women in the Czech Republic: Feminism, Czech Style' *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* Vol.16 (3) : 407-430.

**Kay R.** 2002 'A Liberation from Emancipation? Changing Discourses on Women's Employment in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia' *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 18 (1): 51-72.

**Levitt P. and Khagram S.** 2007 'Constructing Transnational Studies' in *The Transnational Studies Reader*, New York: Routledge Press.

**Levitt P. and Lamba-Nieves D.** 2011 'Social Remittances Revisited' *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 37 (1): 1-22.

**North C. L.** 2004 'Naked Women, Feminism and Newsroom Culture' *Australian Journal of Communication* 31(2): 56-68.

**Phelan P.** 1993 '*Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*' London: Routledge.

**Rubchak M.** 2012 'Seeing pink: Searching for gender justice through opposition in Ukraine'

*European Journal of Women's Studies* 19(1): 55 –72.

**Woodward K. & Woodward S.** 2009 *'Why Feminism Matter: Feminism Lost and Found'*  
Basingstoke: PALGRAVE MCMILLAN.

**Zychowicz J.** 2011 'Two Bad Words: FEMEN & Feminism in Independent Ukraine' *The  
Athropology of East Europe Review* 29(2):215-227.

#### **Web Resources:**

**Al-Jazeera**, 2013 'The Stream: Who Speaks for Muslim Women?' [April 16 Episode] Available at:  
<http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201304050033-0022659> [Accessed on 06/01/2014]

**Huffington Post** [on-line], 2013 'Amina Sboui Quits FEMEN: 'I Do Not Want My Name To Be  
Associated With An Islamophobic Organization' [Last Updated 08/20/2013 12:47pm] Available at:  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/20/amina-sboui-quits-femen\\_n\\_3785724.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/20/amina-sboui-quits-femen_n_3785724.html) [Accessed  
on 10/01/2014]

**Huffington Post** [on-line], 2013 'Femen Stamp Sparks Controversy In France' [Last Updated  
07/15/2013 3:16 pm] Available at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/15/femen-post-  
stamp\\_n\\_3599671.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/15/femen-post-stamp_n_3599671.html) [Accessed on 10/01/2014]

**Femen Blog**, Available at: <http://femen.org/> [Accessed on 10/01/2014]

**Kruk K.** 2013 Comment is Free: 'In Ukraine, we are protesting to preserve our dignity'. The  
Guardian [on-line] Available at: [http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/17/ukraine-  
protesting-euromaidan](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/17/ukraine-protesting-euromaidan) [Accessed on 17/12/2013]

**Prymachyk I.** 2010 *'Femen wants to move from public exposure to political power'* Kiyv Post [on-  
line] [Last Updated April 29, 2010, 4:59 p.m.] Available at:  
[http://www.kyivpost.com/content/politics/femen-wants-to-move-from-public-exposure-to-politi-  
65379.html](http://www.kyivpost.com/content/politics/femen-wants-to-move-from-public-exposure-to-politi-65379.html) [Accessed on: 10/01/2014]

**Taylor J.** 2013 *'Topless Jihadis. Inside Femen the World's Most Provocative Activist Group'* The  
Atlantic, Available from: <http://www.theatlantic.com/ebooks>