Sextremism – a new radical feminism

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Bias disclaimer: I have been a supporter of FEMEN, however I have tried to keep this paper as objective as possible.
Introduction
This paper examines the new form of feminism labeled by FEMEN as ‘sextremism.’ FEMEN and sextremism are inseparable concepts, because FEMEN coined the term to describe their approach to feminist activism. As they define it in slightly broken English, “sextremism is female sexuality rebelling against patriarchy and embodied in the extremal [sic] political direct action events.”

History
FEMEN was founded on April 10, 2008 by 23-year-old Anna Hutsol to protest Ukrainian women being duped into prostitution overseas and the Ukraine becoming a hotspot for sex tourism. Early protests were fairly ordinary, and hence got little attention. In September 2008 at a protest in front of the Turkish embassy (many of the sex tourists are Turks), a dozen FEMEN members dressed as sexy nurses to reduce politically exaggerated fears over the swine flu epidemic (Figure 1).

Figure 1. FEMEN protest on September 21, 2008 in Kiev, Ukraine. Their underwear was made from anti-infection masks.

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1 FEMEN’s official website, [http://femen.org/en/about](http://femen.org/en/about)
2 Feminine FEMEN targets 'sexpats', [http://www.kyivpost.com/content/ukraine/feminine-femen-targets-sexpats-29898.html](http://www.kyivpost.com/content/ukraine/feminine-femen-targets-sexpats-29898.html)
Their media visibility shot up in August 2009 when Oksana Shachko went topless at their protest on Ukrainian independence day. The massive publicity led to topless protests quickly becoming FEMEN’s trademark, along with wreaths of flowers on their heads and long ribbons (Figure 2).

![Figure 2. Typical FEMEN protest attire – topless, wearing flowers and ribbons, slogans written on themselves, and sometimes their breasts painted (here with the colors of the Ukrainian flag).](image)

In addition to Anna and Oksana, key FEMEN organizers include Inna Shevchenko and Alexandra Shevchenko, with political strategy help (some claim more) from Viktor Svyatskiy.5 6

By early 2011 FEMEN started getting more international attention, and their protests started expanding from Kiev into events in Minsk, Odessa, Hanover, and several other cities by late 2011. This expansion led to FEMEN branches opening in many other countries, including Poland, Switzerland, Italy, Israel,

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Brazil, Germany, France, the United States, Canada, Bulgaria, and Tunisia. An unofficial site claims over 30 chapters of FEMEN worldwide. The French and German chapters appear to be the most mature organizations at this time (December 2013), and the French chapter has become the site for a sextremism training camp for hundreds of activists. Many chapters created their own version of the FEMEN logo, filling in the colors and symbols of their flag (Figure 3). FEMEN has claimed as many as 150,000 supporters worldwide.

![Logos of various FEMEN chapters.](image)

The symbols of FEMEN are quite deliberately chosen. The flower crown is “femininity and proud insubmission, a crown of heroism.” Writing on their skin they call a “body-poster” which allows “the truth delivered by the body by means of nudity and meanings inscribed on it.” Their slogans fit this

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10 FEMEN’s official website, [http://femen.org/en/about](http://femen.org/en/about)
image: “My Body Is My Weapon!” and “Our God is Woman! Our Mission is a Protest! Our Weapon is bare breast!”

Their logo (left) is a variation on the Ukrainian letter F, Ф, doubled to represent two breasts. From the start, some questioned why FEMEN uses nudity to promote a feminist agenda.

Their response was pragmatic: “we understand that this is the only way to be heard in this country. If we staged simple protests with banners, then our claims would not have been noticed.”

FEMEN has grown quickly in its five year history, and is supported by donations as well as its online store. The store was originally only in Russian, but in the last couple of years has expanded not only to English but now accepts four currencies (US $, €, £, and Canadian $) and offers products to support at least seven chapters in addition to the mother organization.

Principles of Sextremism
The focus of FEMEN has grown from its initial emphasis on opposing sex tourism and forced prostitution to the explicit goal of ‘complete victory over patriarchy’ because patriarchy is seen as systematic slavery of women. In order to reach this goal their objectives include:

- To ideologically undermine the fundamental institutes of patriarchy - dictatorship, sex-industry, and church
- Provoke patriarchy into open conflict and thereby discredit it
- Create a world-wide women’s union and initiate global women’s mob law over patriarchy
- Instill a culture of active opposition to evil
- Promote revolutionary female sexuality

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FEMEN’s opposition to dictatorships has resulted in protest actions against many leaders, such as Russian President Vladimir Putin, German chancellor Angela Merkel, and Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich.\(^{14}\) Their most recent protest against Yanukovich involved peeing on his photo.\(^{15}\) Literally.

Actions against the sex industry have been a staple of FEMEN since its (her?) inception,\(^{16}\) but sometimes it’s taken surprising forms. Several actions have been at major sporting events (e.g. soccer tournaments\(^ {17}\)) because those events draw large crowds and additional prostitutes are brought in to meet the surge in demand. It’s comparable to FEMEN protesting at the Super Bowl or World Series or a political convention. This approach ignores a vocal minority who wish to be prostitutes or wish it to be regulated, like this person on their Facebook site who wrote “I do agree that many many sex workers are exploited, but not that all prostitution is slavery. The trade needs regulation, not criminalisation, IMO.” The ladies of FEMEN have seen such institutional abuses of prostitution that apparently that viewpoint isn’t significant to them.

FEMEN’s actions against organized religion have been a fairly new dimension of their activism, such as protests against the Vatican’s opposition to gay marriage and the open homophobia of Pope Benedict XVI.\(^ {18}\) Even more controversial, FEMEN activists cut down a wooden cross to protest Russian prosecution of the punk band Pussy Riot.\(^ {19}\)

Clearly FEMEN has taken a very active and highly visible stand through brief and startling actions, with the hopes that they will expose and discredit key oppressors of women around the world. Their focus on prostitution, for example, emphasizes “criminalization of the client” of that service (e.g. campaigns

\(^{14}\) Femen activist tells how protest against Putin and Merkel was planned, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/12/femen-activist-protest-putin-merkel

\(^{15}\) Yanukovich, piss off!, http://femen.org/en/gallery/id/277


\(^{18}\) FEMEN activists in 'Pope no more' protest against Vatican (video), http://digitaljournal.com/article/345560

such as “You don’t buy, I don’t sell”\textsuperscript{20}, and the blind eye turned by law enforcement. They describe their role this way: “this is what Femen does, we open the truth. We’re taking off masks from those wearing masks.”\textsuperscript{21}

Their attempts to unify women have certainly had mixed results, as we’ll discuss in the global response section of this paper. Their frequent actions and increasingly global reach have helped to create the culture of opposition they wish to achieve. Their message and actions are being adapted to the needs of each country; where there is no dictatorship, they focus on gay rights and prostitution, for example.\textsuperscript{22}

FEMEN sees control over women’s bodies and sexuality as key elements of their oppression. “Complete control over the woman’s body is the key instrument of her suppression; the woman’s sexual demarche is the key to her liberation.” Their nudity shows their “undisguised hatred toward the patriarchal order and new aesthetics of women’s revolution.”\textsuperscript{23}

**Comparison to Other Feminisms\textsuperscript{24}**

Liberal feminism and FEMEN agree that the state should stay out of people’s private affairs. FEMEN would agree more with welfare liberalism, because they would support state assistance in getting women out of forced prostitution, for example. Also like liberal feminists, FEMEN was founded by middle class white women, though it is diversifying as it spreads globally. FEMEN would agree with basic principles from John Stuart and Harriet Taylor Mill, such as the need for equal rights and opportunities for men and women; however FEMEN would avoid the tendency toward androgyny and instead would prefer to celebrate women in their own right. Unlike many liberal feminists, FEMEN has stayed clear of

\textsuperscript{20} You don’t buy, I don’t sell. Netherlands, \url{http://femen.org/en/gallery/id/259}

\textsuperscript{21} Topless Femen leader: British women need us, \url{http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/10441294/Topless-woman-Femen-leader-British-women-need-us.html}

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid

\textsuperscript{23} FEMEN’s official website, \url{http://femen.org/en/about}

\textsuperscript{24} This whole section is based on analysis and quotes from Feminist Thought by Rosemarie Tong, 4E, ©2014.
political issues such as legislative activism (except to protest specific laws they don’t like) and chose not to get involved in running for office, which they considered in 2010.25

Radical feminism is naturally home base for FEMEN. They’d agree wholeheartedly with Kate Millett, who insisted that the roots of women’s oppression are buried deep in patriarchy’s sex/gender system.

FEMEN is closer to radical-cultural feminism, affirming that women’s femaleness is a critical element, although they wouldn’t go so far as to say the only good sex for women is monogamous lesbianism.

FEMEN would agree with the radical-cultural claim that pornography is almost always harmful to women.26 FEMEN doesn’t focus a lot of attention on motherhood or reproductive rights issues, but FEMEN Spain participated in a “My pussy, my rules!” protest for reproductive choice.27

Some connections can be found between FEMEN and socialist feminism. Engels believed that the patriarchy was maintained because it benefits the bourgeois to do so. Because of the need for passing on wealth to children, patrilineage was created, thereby defeating women. So while Marxist feminism wants to abolish capitalism, socialist feminism recognizes that there are other factors beyond capitalism.

FEMEN would probably agree with Alison Jaggar that while capitalism oppresses women as workers, patriarchy oppresses women as women.

FEMEN and psychoanalytic feminism don’t connect at all. For example, Dorothy Dinnerstein’s views on erotic impulse and sexual excitement portray a wildly different, placid image than the Amazonian in-your-face independence of FEMEN. Similarly FEMEN and maternity or caregiving don’t cross paths, so there is no real connection between FEMEN and care-based feminism. This could be another area where the youth of the FEMEN activists comes into play; they may not have been very concerned with reproductive issues personally yet, so they aren’t a focal point for FEMEN.

I don’t see much connection between FEMEN and the existentialist or postmodern feminist. One could argue that de Beauvoir’s view, women’s oppression is due to men’s desire to control them, is the root cause of patriarchy. Anything could connect to postmodern feminism, but FEMEN seems more singular in its focus on removing the patriarchy.

FEMEN’s global reach, emphasis on the right to control their own bodies, and desire to remove sources of oppression give them some connection to global feminism. Otherwise they don’t have much connection to women of color feminism, though for example the FEMEN Brazil chapter has a substantial non-white constituency.

FEMEN has some elements of queer feminism. They actively support gay rights and freedom of sexual expression. In addition to the Vatican protest noted earlier, they recently climbed a fence outside the Russian embassy in Stockholm to protest oppressive Russian policies toward homosexuals.28

In summary, FEMEN is most closely aligned with radical-cultural feminism, with elements of liberal, socialist, global, and queer feminism.

**Local and World Reaction to FEMEN**

The Ukraine is 95% Orthodox or Catholic29, so FEMEN’s attacks on organized religion aren’t earning them much respect at home. The Ukrainian people are 95% ethnically Ukrainian or Russian, so the lack of diversity among FEMEN’s founders isn’t shocking. The founders were all also quite young when FEMEN was founded (age 18-23), and that immaturity has offset some of their youthful exuberance to change the world. Reaction to FEMEN within Ukraine has been limited. With a GDP per capita ranked 140th in the world30, most Ukrainians are too busy with everyday survival to focus on protests.
Outside the Ukraine, people seem polarized by FEMEN’s actions. FEMEN’s lack of understanding of cultural issues has led to some serious gaffes, such as nude protests in front of a mosque. Similarly they lost the support of Amina Sboui (Tyler?), the Tunisian lady who posted nude pictures of herself on Facebook. She claims that FEMEN was Islamophobic. In reviewing FEMEN’s literature, I’d say they are far more atheistic, not specifically against Islam.

Many other FEMEN protests are poorly understood, such as the crashing of Germany’s Next Top Model TV show in May 2013. I think for many the juxtaposition of half-naked protesters next to half naked models made it unclear what was FEMEN’s point. The reason for the protest was to object to young girls being very deliberately objectified. FEMEN regards the fashion industry as “an element of pimp business” because it leads to many girls following false ideals, leading many to emotional disease and into sex work.

On the other hand, FEMEN also garners a lot of support from some people who admire their initiative and bravery to expose themselves (obvious pun) in the name of a cause they believe in. For example, a newcomer to FEMEN is Séverine Robert, a student in France of Lebanese and French descent. She writes on their Facebook site “While growing up, I began to realize that we are treated as a property, objects, not as human beings who think by themself and who can become who they want. Women body is used by media to sell and attract customers, prostitution is considered as a normal thing. Our bodies are constantly the target of jugements, men wants to control women’s thoughts, acts and life. They want us to be either wives or either prostitutes. But this doesn’t concerns only muslim countries, even bouddism is discriminating women.

References:
33 FEMEN’s official website, http://femen.org/en/about
34 Topless 'Top Model' Protestors Crash Finale On Behalf Of FEMEN, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/31/topless‐top‐model‐protestors_n_3366240.html
That’s why I agree with you and I am against religion institutions. People have always used religion to justify the domination over women. Customs as circumcision, breast ironing, murder of little girls at their birth, education access ban for girls, sharia, rapes and so many others violences must stop !”

FEMEN’s Facebook site has over 26,000 followers; nowhere near the millions of movie and music stars, but still a significant audience. Their Facebook feedback is predominantly positive, but ranges from “femen ef off, get real ladies, get a job, go lead a company or something” and “thanks for the boobs” to “Chile needs FEMEN too!!” and “long live FEMEN for its effort against religion, against oppression of women, for its fight against injustice.”

FEMEN’s protests have garnered much attention from law enforcement agencies. Activists have been arrested, imprisoned, beaten, verbally harassed, and received death threats in several countries. Some activists have been charged with ‘hooliganism’ in Italy, Tunisia, and Ukraine; and one had a tooth knocked out while protesting in France. The Paris office of FEMEN was set on fire in 2013 after they received a phone call warning they were ‘witches’ who should ‘burn.’ Harassment got so severe in the Ukraine that FEMEN left their Kiev office in August 2013 and are now operating out of their Paris office. FEMEN has certainly succeeded in getting people’s attention!

Conclusion
FEMEN has developed a flavor of feminism that incorporates female nudity and brief protest actions in order to fight the main cause of women’s oppression, patriarchy. Their core objectives are fighting against dictatorships, the sex industry, and most forms of organized religion. Most closely aligned with radical-cultural feminism, FEMEN has alienated many potential supporters by attacking seemingly unrelated targets such as fashion shows and soccer games. With such a broad goal (end patriarchy), FEMEN’s actions may become too diverse and lose focus.

FEMEN has grown from its foundation in the Ukraine to over two dozen chapters worldwide, with on the order of a hundred thousand supporters and hundreds of trained activists. They have succeeded in getting the attention of the media (breasts usually do that), law enforcement, and politicians. The question that remains to be seen is where they will go from here.