

Members of Femen, a Ukrainian feminist lobby group, make themselves known in Kiev's main square.

# FLASHING FOR FEMINISM

**MEET EUROPE'S RAUNCHY REBELS**

They're young, brash, beautiful, politically active and usually topless – Sarah J. Robbins meets the controversial new generation of activists exposing themselves to expose sexism

AUSTRIAL





Clockwise from above left: raw politics ... members of Femen rally against a 2010 visit by Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin; ensuring they're heard on election day; fighting for Saudi women's right to drive; Inna Shevchenko enlists flower power.

Police blocked off Kiev's Maidan Square on a chilly morning last April as dignitaries, including Russian president Dmitry Medvedev and UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon, arrived to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Behind the barricades, Inna Shevchenko pulled a baseball cap low on her head and furtively checked the time on her iPhone. At the stroke of 8am, the pretty 20 year old tore off her hat and windbreaker and launched into her favoured brand of political activism. Naked from the waist up, save for a gas mask and a crown of flowers atop her flowing blonde tresses, Shevchenko darted around the barriers, sprinted to the foot of a statue in the square and joined nine other beautiful, topless, garlanded women who'd also run from the crowd in synchronised protest. Holding placards declaring "Cancer of Democracy," the semi-nude radicals shouted at stunned onlookers and media that corruption in Ukraine posed more of a threat than the toxic Chernobyl site. It was the latest in a frenzied jumble of glamour and guerrilla protest that has become the colourful calling card of Femen, a political-feminist lobby group that uses raw sexuality to highlight issues they say are affecting Ukraine's women - from discrimination to sex tourism, prostitution and human trafficking. With some 300 members ranging in age from 16 to 63 (it's mostly the younger ones who go topless), Femen specialises in storming high-stakes public events unannounced - except for tip-offs to the media and their followers. Headlines are almost

guaranteed. "We are trying to explain to other women," explains Shevchenko, a senior figure in Femen, "that beauty is a powerful tool." And they have powerful people in their sights. As all eyes fell on Ukraine for the Chernobyl anniversary, the nubile activists screamed that President Viktor Yanukovich and Prime Minister Mykola Azarov should be placed inside the concrete sarcophagus surrounding the radioactive nuclear reactor as punishment for human rights

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violations. When police advanced, the situation exploded: six women took off in different directions, but four, including Shevchenko and her sister, Sasha, were hauled away flailing and shrieking. "One [policeman] put me in a headlock ... and I felt a huge pain," says Shevchenko, who suffered a broken clavicle. "Maybe he had pleasure when he made me feel so bad." Kiev police spokesman Volodymyr Polishchuk admits officers attend Femen protests, but denies they use "brutal force". "[Femen] draw attention to themselves by screaming and shouting," he says, "but nobody hurts them." Femen founder Anna Hutsol says the melee in Maidan Square shows "the situation [for activists] in Ukraine is getting worse."

Even so, on the morning after her arrest, Shevchenko went directly to Femen headquarters, at popular expat hangout the Cupidon bar, to plot new protests. "When your work is activism, then you understand that there is no other way to do anything here in this country," she says defiantly. "This is my work, my style of living - to show that women don't have to be scared."

One of Femen's major gripes is with the rise of sex tourism in the increasingly patriarchal country. Tetyana Bureychak, a sociologist and associate professor at Ukraine's National University of Lviv, says sex tourism is evident everywhere. "When you come to Kiev and get a free map of the city, it is full of advertisements for erotic massage salons and escort services," she points out. "The Ukrainian government so far has connived this issue and I have very little hope that anything will be done to regulate the situation." In 2005, Ukraine dropped visa requirements for visitors from the EU, the US, Canada, Japan and several other countries. Although Australians and New Zealanders still require a visa, Antipodean



Above: a protester is detained by police, who have been accused of using unnecessary force against the women. Above right: an activist with cancer protests against the health system. Right: Femen uses beauty to effect change.



PHOTOGRAPHED BY AAP; AUSTRALIA; GETTY IMAGES. "THE GLOBAL GENDER GAP REPORT", WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM, 2010. "ESTIMATING THE EXTENT OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING FROM UKRAINE", THE INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION, 2009. "TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS REPORT", US DEPARTMENT OF STATE, 2011

men continue to frequent Ukraine in search of women. Today, more than 20 million people visit annually. A lack of regulation, combined with a dismal economic climate where women make, on average, 59 per cent of what men do, has seen a surge in human trafficking. The number of Ukrainians forced into slavery - including sex slavery - is also on the rise, with an estimated 36,000 victims\* trafficked to other countries per year. The most comprehensive study† of trafficking ever undertaken, issued this year by the US Department of State, found the Ukrainian government failed to adequately investigate or prosecute local officials complicit in human trafficking, and pointed out that no national support mechanism for victims exists. "Each girl in Kiev hears from sex tourists asking them to have sex, inviting them to hotels - I could tell you horrible stories," says Hutsol, 28, a dark-eyed redhead. Fed up with the abuse of women, she founded Femen in 2008. With few economic prospects, Hutsol says many young women fall victim to sexual predators. "They believe they've met a prince and he will marry her and take her to another country, where she will live a beautiful life." Femen's vocal and highly visible opposition to sex tourism is in stark contrast to the government's silence. "There are no politicians in Ukraine who openly declare their support for feminist ideas," says Bureychak. There are also fewer female politicians in Ukraine. Last year, Prime Minister Azarov appointed an all-male cabinet and stated that, "Conducting reforms is not a woman's business." Last February, Femen acted when New Zealand radio station The Rock FM ran a "Win a Wife" contest. The prize? A 12-day trip to Ukraine accompanied by a woman from the Endless Love

dating service. The day after the station named winemaker Greg Morgan the winner, Femen descended on a Kiev marriage registration office, where nine members wearing wedding veils protested topless in the snow. On the day of Morgan's scheduled arrival, they went to Donetsk International Airport, bare-breasted and carrying a placard that declared, "Ukraine is Not a Brothel!" Morgan was a no-show. "We made him feel scared to come here," says Hutsol proudly. Yet some feminists are uncomfortable with the notion of women protesting against sexual objectification by sexually objectifying themselves. "While I wholeheartedly support their agenda ... I just cannot subscribe to their methods," says well-known Ukraine feminist Maria Dmytrieva. "They are abusing the desire of the male audience to consume women's bodies, but they are unable to come up with a coherent message besides attracting attention to themselves." But Hutsol argues that, "to undress in a protest is a scream of the soul". They don't only scream at sex tourism; Femen reacts whenever it perceives hypocrisy or human rights abuses. Their first demonstration, in 2008, attacked the government over annual summer hot water shortages in student dormitories

across Kiev. "From the beginning, the strategy was the same as it is now," says Hutsol, who holds a degree in economics. "To use eroticism as a new way of creating a culture of protest here." Employing an approach inspired by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), Hutsol assembled a group of 70 people and urged them to strip off most of their clothes and swim in public fountains while chanting and waving placards. Not surprisingly, the protest received wide media attention. They've since applied the formula to campaign on issues beyond Ukraine's borders, shucking their shirts and donning headscarves to protest laws that prohibit women in Saudi Arabia from driving cars. "In the beginning, I thought this style of protest was crazy," says Inna Shevchenko. But while studying at the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kiev and working in the press service for the city, she, too, grew frustrated by her nation's political and social situation. "I understood that this really is a country of men," she says. "It's a place where my mother is working eight hours to earn \$200, where my younger sister can't find work, although she is intelligent and active." At Femen, it didn't take long ▶



INNA SHEVCHENKO  
Activist



ANNA HUTSOL  
Femen founder



Above right: Femen fear Ukraine's hosting of the Euro 2012 soccer championship will bring an onslaught of sex tourists. Right: a topless protest about increasing the female retirement age ends in arrest.

for Shevchenko to embrace topless tactics. "I didn't have money to make the revolution, and I didn't have people who can support me ... to beat everyone," she says. "But I have my body and my mind, and I should show something that will shock people and get attention."

Today, Femen is a full-time job for Shevchenko and Hutsol, who run the organisation with small donations, mostly from Western expats living in Kiev. "They know public protests and they know what charity means," explains Hutsol. For extra income, they sell wares such as T-shirts and tote bags bearing Femen's logo: two circles - one yellow, the other blue - representing breasts.

One of Femen's most steadfast local supporters, Andriy Kolomiyets, 26, donates to the lobby group so the women can maintain financial and ideological independence. "I think if their style of protest doesn't violate moral, religious or racial-tolerance standards, that it's

his only financial support is a 20 per cent discount on drinks, Balandin claims his association with Femen has come at a cost. Recently, local authorities refused to grant him permission for outdoor seating. "I didn't get any direct explanation," he says, "but they hinted that it was because I supported Femen."

While Femen is a household name in Ukraine, its critics and supporters alike wrestle with the difference between provoking a reaction and effecting change. "It is uncertain if people do remember what Femen protests are about, but it is clear that everyone remembers Femen," says Professor Bureychak, whose students have cited Femen as their first association with the word "feminism."



**"Their bodies are only young, beautiful, slim. There are no different women among them" Professor Tetyana Bureychak**

appropriate," says Kolomiyets, who works for a provider of sports scores and statistics. "That style is pretty effective in Ukraine today."

There's a strong loyalty among the activists, too. Theatre agency worker Evgenia Kraizman, 23, juggles work and graduate school with half-naked protesting but says if she were given a choice between paid work and Femen, she'd choose activism. "We live in a country with very passive people - they can complain about some issues sitting on their couch drinking beer or vodka, but they don't have the guts for action," asserts Kraizman. "We do action."

Fyodor Balandin, 38, has allowed Femen to use his Cupidon bar as their headquarters from day one. Although

Even the strongest supporters see issues. "They identify a problem and bring it up," says bar owner Balandin, "but they do not give any hint what to do next." Hutsol argues that Femen does offer solutions. "Let's say we want to stop those hot water cut-offs in Kiev," she says. "We say the authorities should stop stealing money from the city budget and spend it on new pipes." Although their protest caused the municipal administration to promise the pipes would be fixed, shortages continue.

Whether they're effective or not, Bureychak is critical of the way Femen represents female beauty. "Their bodies are only young, beautiful, slim, with good-looking breasts," she says. "All of them fit into the canons of

traditional feminine beauty. There are no 'different' women among them."

But Hutsol says times have changed since feminists had to fight for rights like suffrage and equal education. "Back then, they had to prove that they do not differ from men, so they behaved like men," she states. "Now a woman has to behave like a woman, but she should demand more rights for herself, to be socially and politically active. This rough, manly feminism is not good anymore."

Only time will tell if she's proven right. Meanwhile, Femen is expanding its reach to Poland and beyond, with plans for events in Switzerland, Italy and Spain. "We want to open our branches in every European capital," says Shevchenko, adding that beauty will definitely remain one of Femen's greatest weapons. "With its help, women can speak about any problem, and they won't be unnoticed." ■

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