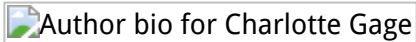


FEMEN and Malala as feminist protest 'brands' – Some polarities in feminist activism

 Author bio for Charlotte Gage

Charlotte Gage has been working in the women's sector in the UK and internationally for the past seven years with a focus on policy and human rights and is now undertaking an MSc in Gender at the LSE Gender Institute.

Here, she reflects on the striking differences in 'branding' as well as possible points of convergence between the feminisms of FEMEN and Malala Yousafzai.

are challenging.

I also imagined them in conversation – what would be the similarities in their positions? What would be the differences? What would they think of each other's methods of activism? Could they see agreements and universalities in their positions, and how much would they themselves see their activism as opposed?

The specific imaging and positioning of these women and their campaigns seemed clear. Without going in to the **controversies** revealed by the film itself, FEMEN has been created as a specific 'brand' through the imagery and representation of their protests, with the clear intention to use this 'brand' as a way to gain media attention and notoriety. However, many people have argued that this method of protest simply reinforces stereotypical and objectifying images of women (see for example [here](#)). The creation of the FEMEN 'brand' was originally exclusive: women 'auditioned' to be involved, and were selected based on a specific aesthetic of white, long-haired, blond women who reflected a hegemonic Western ideal of beauty.

 Sasha Shevchenko (FEMEN)

(img via [ivabellini](#))

women can now get involved. It will be interesting to see how possible this broader inclusion is now that the visual 'brand' has already been created, and further, whether the focus of their protest work will continue to be on going top-less. Now that FEMEN is known globally and local chapters are being set up internationally, perhaps the name alone will be enough to gain media attention, potentially leading to the use of different types of protest in the future. Sasha argued that FEMEN's tactics and violent protests subvert and radicalise a stereotypical presentation of femininity and use it for political ends. The model/actress/porn star trope is thus seen in popular culture as capable of retaliation and having autonomy. The idea of reclaiming women's bodies from male ownership, not as sex objects but for protest, was empowering — and Sasha's feminist analysis of why this is important was clear when she spoke after the film.

Malala similarly had a clear analysis of women's rights (although she never used the word feminism), and her 'brand' has also been carefully created, as well as **criticised**. What seemed key to me was her positioning as a child and the ideas of innocence and purity associated [with](#) this

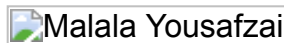
representation. Because of the way her image has been created, it is easier to see her as a martyr or victim even though she is speaking strongly against current regimes that are oppressive to women. The visual representation of her religious beliefs reflected by her wearing the niqab may lead to her being seen as passive, according to Western conceptions of Islam. Indeed, she has a conventionally religious outlook which impacts on her position on women's sexuality outside marriage, and possibly other issues such as homosexuality, although she did not speak about this when I saw her. The representation of childlike innocence combined with the typical Western interpretation of her religious identity as 'Other' could potentially limit or position her feminist voice and the perceived legitimacy of her challenges to patriarchy.

The events I attended created for me a juxtaposition between FEMEN as overtly sexualised women and bodies promoting 'sextremism,' and Malala as a desexualised child upholding normative ideas about the control of sexuality. It would be interesting to see if Malala's position changes if she gets married and has children or if she became publicly sexualised in some way or will this identity always be denied her because it is at odds with her political role?

However, there are similarities in the way that the bodies of these women have become sites of their activism. Malala's body was physically attacked by the Taliban for exercising her right to education; so in some ways, her politics were expressed through her female body simply boarding a bus going to school. For FEMEN, the site of the body as protest is more explicit but has led to significant criticism (see for example [here](#) and [here](#)), often from other women. Is this just another way of denying and controlling their bodies and sexuality? If they were not protesting in this way would they face similar responses, or be ignored? Likewise, if Malala's body had not been physically marked, would she too have been ignored?

The violence carried out against the female protesters by the authorities at the FEMEN protests and the abuse they experience when arrested could be seen as a response to their overt challenge to the status quo, and so as deserved or expected. Conversely, the violence Malala suffered is seen (in the West) as completely unjustified and only goes towards cementing her image as an innocent and passive victim, thus a figure who is easy to empathise with and support. The use or not of the word 'feminism' explicitly positions these women within current discourses about women's rights and places them on a spectrum of what is acceptable for wider public consumption versus what is seen as too radical.

The reification of **Malala as an icon** is also interesting. When I



saw her speak she explicitly said that she did not want to be deified and the focus should not be on her but on the issues that she is raising, but it already seems too late. Her image plays neatly into celebrity culture and the need for specific people to become representational of broader issues. She strengthens this role by talking about her family and fighting with her brothers and so presenting herself as a 'normal' 16 year old girl, allowing for closer and personal identification. For this reason, she is often represented as a spokesperson and hero for young girls, reconfirming her role as a child icon.

I was also struck by how religion is key to the identities of these women. FEMEN focus on three universal oppressions of women: patriarchy, sexual objectification, and religion. They see religion as a key cause of women's subordination globally and denial of their sexuality; hence, their protests are grounded in atheism. Malala's identity and positioning is clearly connected to her identity as a Muslim woman and she does not see any conflict between this and her work for women's rights. This also means that she nominally shares in the religion of the Taliban, her attackers, although she clearly disagrees with their interpretation of the Koran and Islamic laws. Any connection to Islam, however, typically produces individuals as 'Others' in dominant political spaces in the West, but this connection also allows her to be seen as a global ambassador for women's rights and Muslim women more broadly.

The construction of these different 'brands' is also important in determining the access of these campaigners to different political and social spaces. Malala has spoken at the UN and **has** been

invited into locations of power in the US and the UK because her message is not seen as controversial in these places; further, her arguments support current norms around education and 'terrorism.' In recent press, there has been **discussion** about Malala's positive reception in the West because her story supports Western political interests, compared to other young women whose traumatic experiences call for criticism of Western military involvement in the Middle East. However, when I saw her speak, Malala demonstrated a clear understanding of the role of governments in oppression and was overtly critical of the role played by the US and UK governments in Pakistan. Even so, she is not seen as a threat to the current Western system and since her demands tie in broadly with global politics, it is possible to give her access to these spaces and to use her as an example of inclusion. Conversely, the repression of FEMEN protesters around the world can be seen as a result of their transgression into public space uninvited, with a much more radical and disruptive agenda that is at odds with prevailing political hegemony.

Seeing both these constructions of feminist/women's rights activism on the same day was a good way to think about how campaigning 'brands' are created and how drastically these can differ; as well as about the creation of women and women's bodies as sites of protest. It also seemed clear that different types of female protest are included/excluded and inclusive/exclusive in different ways, and that this has implications for the 'feminist project' and what is ultimately achievable in terms of change. Even if we do have the same goals, can we use different methods to achieve them? Is it possible that these different approaches are not contradictory and do not reinforce patriarchal discourses? Are all forms of protest equally important if they lead to the same ends?

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