In September 2015, a conference on the role of women in Islam took place in Pontoise, near Paris. At one point, two Muslim men were addressing the audience, discussing the question of whether it was right for men to beat their wives. Suddenly, two young women rushed onto the stage and removed their abayas (cloaks) to reveal naked upper bodies, showing the words, in French and Arabic, ‘No one subjugates me’ and ‘I am my own prophet’. They were subdued by several men and forcibly removed from the stage.

The two demonstrators, one of Algerian and the other of Tunisian descent, and both from Muslim families, were members of the radical group Femen.

Femen
Femen was founded in Ukraine in 2008. It is now based in Paris, its founder having fled Ukraine to avoid arrest after cutting down a wooden cross with a chainsaw in support of the jailed Russian punk group Pussy Riot. Though few in number, Femen’s members receive a great deal of media attention at demonstrations, largely because of their tactics.

Aims and tactics
Femen has really only one broad aim, which is to wage war on patriarchy. This ‘war’ is carried out on several fronts, namely on religions, particularly Islam and...
Roman Catholicism, the sex industry, issues of human rights, including anti-abortion, and ‘womanophobia’.

Femen’s main tactic is to mount bare-breasted demonstrations. Femen refers to these protests as ‘topless jihad’. These have included:

- Supporting gay rights during the pope’s weekly prayers in Rome.
- Protesting against the use of super-thin models during Milan fashion week.
- Protesting against the male domination of the world economy at the economic summit in Davos.
- Demonstrating against the far-right Front National party at a rally in France led by Marine Le Pen.

Initially, Femen’s protests were not topless. In Sweden, protesting about the sex industry, Femen members were fully clothed and draped in price tags, to symbolise the sale of women’s bodies for sex. Femen’s first topless protest was in 2010, and despite initial doubts, the method was gradually adopted, as they realised that such protests resulted in much greater media coverage than clothed ones. Their current leader, Inna Shevchenko, told Guardian reporter Kira Cochrane: ‘Sometimes when we were not topless, we were talking about much more important topics, but they were just ignored.’ The technique of painting their slogans on their bodies came about when they realised that in photographs of their topless demonstrations, their bodies were shown but their banners were cropped out of the pictures.

Criticisms

Leading critics are perhaps unsurprisingly found among Muslims and church leaders, but there are others. Susan Carland believes Femen’s attitudes towards Muslim women are ill-informed and condescending. Carland’s research on Muslim women found that a majority of interviewees use Islam in their fight against sexism, believing in an egalitarian Islam based on authentic interpretations of the faith.

Others claim that by displaying their naked breasts Femen members are colluding in the objectification of women’s bodies.

**Femen’s counter-arguments**

Femen’s leaders claim that they are ‘reclaiming women’s bodies for women’. Inna Shevchenko says: ‘I’m proud of the fact that today naked women are not just posing on the cover of Playboy, but can be at an action, angry, and can irritate people.’ Femen members also say that they wish to overturn the stereotype that feminists are ‘ugly women with moustaches’, asserting that the media focus only on the more attractive demonstrators. This seems to be borne out by the fact that a book on the group published in France in 2013 showed photographs of women of all shapes and sizes, but these were not used by the media.

Questions

1. How valid is the claim that a campaign by mainly Western, non-Muslim women to ‘liberate’ Muslim women to ill-informed and patronising?
2. To what extent do Femen’s tactics advance or damage the cause of feminism?

**Weblinks to follow up**

Susan Carland’s Guardian discussion of Femen’s tactics: [www.tinyurl.com/q3sgbr2](http://www.tinyurl.com/q3sgbr2)

Kira Cochrane’s Guardian interview with Inna Shevchenko: [www.tinyurl.com/klz449c](http://www.tinyurl.com/klz449c)

Footage of Femen in Pontoise: [www.tinyurl.com/o8cf3ud](http://www.tinyurl.com/o8cf3ud)

Footage of Femen in Rome: [www.tinyurl.com/q5qas64](http://www.tinyurl.com/q5qas64)