

Topless Jihad: Why Femen Is Right

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Since launching its "[topless jihad](#)" protests across Europe and elsewhere on April 4, Femen has stirred up a media maelstrom, with commentators, mostly Muslim men and women living in the West, taking to the airwaves or the Internet on [CNN](#), the [New York Times](#), [Al Jazeera English](#), and the [Huffington Post](#) (and elsewhere) to call the group racist, classist, imperialist, colonialist, Eurocentric, Islamophobic, orientalist, neo-orientalist, cowardly, or, at best, naïve, and foolish. At least one of those opining veered into infelicitous nonsense: According to Ilana Alazzah, a Muslim activist, Femen's protest recalled "blackface," with its version of feminism "excluding women of all formats," even those women who "don't have vaginas." Another detractor, the Arab-American blogger [Laila Alawa](#), contended (falsely) that the group told "Muslim women to sit down and shut up." The Canadian writer Murtaza Hussain, after noting, with apparent portent, that Femen activists are "mostly white Europeans," considered that their approach "reeks of arrogance." Even the usually balanced blogger Hind Makki availed herself of hyperbole, [in announcing](#), on Al Jazeera English, that Femen "really criminalizes every single Muslim man out there." A "Muslim Women Against Femen" page appeared on Facebook, and a "[Muslimah Pride Day](#)" was proclaimed.

The overall message to Femen has been, in fact, nothing less than "Sit down and shut up." Your skin color and European provenance disqualify you from expressing views on Islam and how Muslim women are treated in the Islamic world.

Yet abuse perpetrated against women in Islam's name lies at the heart of the problem. Only occasionally did the critics note that Femen carried out its most recent mass protest in defense of 19-year-old Amina Tyler, a Tunisian aspirant to Femen who posted, on Femen's Facebook Tunisia [page](#) topless photos of herself, with the words, in Arabic, scrawled across her chest, "My

Body Belongs to Me and Is Not the Source of Anyone's Honor." Among democratically minded folk, this would not be a radical proposition, if the method of delivery -- Femen's trademark method, involving slogans painted on bare breasts -- certainly is. In any case, Amina suffered mightily for her gesture. A Tunisian Muslim official called for her to be "stoned to death." Her family kidnapped her, beat her, and held her in captivity for three weeks, during which time they drugged her, subjected her to an amateur virginity test, forced her to read the Quran, and took her on involuntary visits to imams. Amina's aunt posted a video online in which she called her niece "mentally ill," "unbalanced," and "psychopathic" for her "shameful act," which had injured her father's "pride as a man." On account of such wounded pride, there was good reason to fear for Amina's life. She was in captivity when Femen activists staged their topless jihad; a key slogan, whether chanted or painted on their bodies, was *Free Amina!*

With its topless jihad and Femen leader Inna Shevchenko's subsequent incendiary blog [post](#) on the event, Femen was both defending one of its own and upholding a right to freedom of expression (to say nothing of life and liberty) flagrantly violated by Amina's own family and by an angry, largely Muslim, community from which threats against Amina and Shevchenko continue to emanate. It's worth pointing out that Femen's critics, several of whom professed concern for Amina's well-being, did not speak out in Amina's defense before the jihad, but only post-factum and in passing, all the while pummeling the group standing up for her with stale, politically correct shibboleths and demands to stay out of what they perceived to be their own business.

A week after the topless jihad, Amina managed to escape her captors and is now hiding somewhere in Tunisia. But the attempts to disqualify, on the basis of race and origin, Femen activists from expressing their outrage at what Amina suffered -- and against injustices meted out to other Muslim women -- deserve rebuttal. They aim to stifle a debate about human rights we, as people, regardless of race or creed or nationality, sorely need, especially in view of the "Arab Spring" and its pernicious effects on women's rights in the Middle East and North Africa, to say nothing of honor killings and other gender-related violence in Muslim immigrant communities.

There is a problem, however. The media has long fostered the view that religion should be de facto exempt from the logical scrutiny applied to other

subjects. I am not disputing the right to practice the religion of one's choice, but rather the prevailing cultural rectitude that puts faith beyond the pale of commonsense review, and (in Amina's case), characterizes as "Islamophobic" criticism of the criminal mistreatment of a young woman for daring to buck her society's norms, or of Femen for attacking the forced wearing of the hijab.

Femen, and in particular, Inna Shevchenko, are defying this retrograde rectitude. With protests designed to puncture auras of sanctity, Femen has repeatedly targeted religious leaders -- the Pope, the Russian Orthodox Patriarch, and Belgium's archbishop André-Jozef Léonard, among others. (Shevchenko herself is wanted by authorities in her native Ukraine on charges of "offending religious sentiment" by sawing down a [cross](#) in support of the jailed Russian punk band Pussy Riot.) So it should come as no surprise that she took part in one of the most heated [debates](#) on women, Islam, and the hijab in recent years, butting heads with the Arab-American Muslim blogger, Laila Alawa, who was coiffed in a headscarf. Shevchenko began by declaring how pleased she was to hear so many Muslim women speak out, even if it was against Femen. The moderator then cited acid verbiage about Islam from her blog post.

"We are not calling to stone anyone," Shevchenko replied. "*They* are calling to stone our activist." Femen's problem with Muslim headscarves, she said, centered on whether wearing them was voluntary, adding that the only reason Femen was discussing Islam at all is the "blood, fear, and dead women's bodies" to which it has led, a graphic factual assertion not even Alawa dared contest (though she began to tear up). Despite attempts by the moderator to defuse tensions, Shevchenko demanded of Alawa, who had called herself a feminist, "How can you wear your scarf with so much proudness . . . like it's the hat of Che Guevara? It symbolizes blood and all the crimes that are based on your religion, even if you don't support them If you're a feminist, if you're for liberation, then be brave [enough] to say that we are against that and take off your scarf until the moment that your scarf will not be a symbol of crime."

The moderator called these words "insensitive," and Alawa, still visibly shaken, tried to explain what wearing a scarf meant to her. Yet Shevchenko doubled down.

"I really don't care how many scarves you wear . . . until the moment when

that scarf is symbolizing something, something like blood, something like death." She again urged Alawa to "take [the headscarf] off until the moment when it will not be a symbol of the death of your sisters."

"What you're saying is quite loaded here!" responded the shocked moderator. Alawa, even more shaken up, offered a rambling response, and the show drew to a close.

Should secularists have the right to denounce injustices committed by members of a particular confession? The United Nations resolved that issue more than sixty years ago, when it adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (with, notably, Saudi Arabia abstaining) against "barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind." Race, gender, or nationality cannot disqualify defenders of those rights. Femen, with its campaign in defense of Amina, was exercising a recognized right and striking blows for all those who reject oppression.

"We demand human rights for all women, for Arab women and American women," Shevchenko told me a few days after the emotional debate. "The idea of a Muslim feminist is oxymoronic." Her position could not be clearer -- or more provocatively stated.

By now it should be clear that with Femen, we are dealing with something new. Femen originated in Ukraine, born of young women who grew up without exposure to the West's culture of political correctness and who have scant respect for it; from their country's Soviet past, they know how deleterious the stifling of free speech can be. Now that they have moved to the West, Femen has courageously broken rules and enlivened the debate over religion's role in our world. Its activists are charting a new route for public discourse about women and religion, and making it an unabashedly *universal* discourse, venturing into realms where they may be hated, and they may yet pay a high price for this. But that they have gotten people talking, even shouting and crying, is undeniable, and it is good; only through debate and discussion, sometimes painful, often unsettling, will we progress. Far from discouraging the discourse they have initiated, we should welcome it.