

I will be nude, I will protest, and I will challenge you to your core!

Wednesday 26 March 2014, by [NAMAZIE Maryam](#) (Date first published: 8 March 2014).

All religions have a disturbing view of the female and her body. Islam is no different. Given that Islamism – a regressive political movement with state power and political influence in many places – is using Islam as its banner, however, women's sexuality and bodies are policed and criminalised and misogyny is encouraged and imposed by the state.

In Iran, under Sharia law, for example, a woman's testimony is worth half that of a man's, she can't travel without the permission of her "male guardian", and there's segregation based on gender. Certain fields of study and work are closed to women; girls from puberty onwards can be "married"; veiling is compulsory and women who transgress these norms can face imprisonment, flogging, and even stoning to death.

The idealised woman is obedient, properly veiled, submissive, and accepting of her assigned "place" in society. The rest of us are whores, often compared to unwrapped sweets – covered in flies and free for the taking. We are the source of fitnah in society and blamed for every calamity and natural disaster, as well as the disintegration of the family and society, and deserving of punishment in order to maintain national and Islamic values, pride and honour.

You don't have to look far for evidence of this. Women protesters in Tahrir Square were given virginity tests and routinely blamed for the rape and sexual assault they faced. In Tunisia, Islamists use violence to "correct" the behaviour of women. And in Iran, women are routinely arrested or harassed for acts against chastity and morality.

Islamism's obsession with women's bodies and its insistence that women be veiled and hidden from view means that nudity becomes an important form of public resistance. Islamists want us bound in body bags, not seen and not heard. We refuse to comply.

A nude woman is the antithesis of the idealised veiled and submissive woman. Whilst nude protest is not the only way to resist Islamism and the veil, it is a very modern, practical and appropriate way of doing so. It also challenges discrimination against women and a system which profits from the commodification and sexualisation of women's bodies.

Detractors argue that nude protests play into the hands of sexists by further commodifying the female body. Their erroneous conflation of nudity and obscenity, pornography, vulgarity, and immorality buys into the attitude that female bodies serve only as titillation for the male gaze. They see a nude protestor and cannot see beyond her "tits and ass".

The idea that the female body is shameful, dishonourable, gross and crude fits within this debased view of women's bodies. The shocked outrage at nudity reflects the discomfort with the female body rather than any problematic related to nude protest.

There is nothing wrong with nudity in and of itself. That the female body is used for profit, sexualised and commodified does not make the female body obscene just as it does not make

breastfeeding in public vulgar.

Commodification relies on an objectified image that is separate from the reality of women's bodies, minds and lives and which is used to regulate, control and suppress. Whilst Islamists often portray their rule as a prescription for the debasement of women in western societies, their image of women is the ultimate in objectification. In fact from early on, girls are over-sexualised with the imposition of child veiling. (This viewpoint also sees men as rapists unable to control their urges.)

The actuality and frankness of women's bodies as a form of protest challenges this negative image of females, turns it on its head and undermines the limits of what is deemed socially acceptable. It's subversive and threatens the status quo.

This is different from pornography which is widespread in the Middle East and North Africa. In fact, the more overtly religion and the state intertwine, the more chauvinistic the society and the more pervasive and blatant are pornography, sexual assaults, harassment and violence against women.

It's nudity as protest and outside these socially accepted limits of the woman as either whore or submissive that so enrages.

As Soraya Chemaly writes [\[1\]](#): "when women refuse to sexualise themselves and use their bodies to challenge powerful interests that profit from that sexualisation, the words we should use aren't 'lewd' and 'obscene'; they're 'threatening' and 'destabilizing'. Women who use public nudity for social commentary, art and protest are myth-busting along many dimensions: active, not passive; strong not vulnerable; together, not isolated; public, not private; and, usually, angry, not alluring. The morality offense is misogyny, not nudity".

Nude protest makes women visible in the public space and redefines who controls the female body. It's the reclamation of a tool used for suppression and an insistence that our bodies are our own, not "owned" by anyone, nor the source of honour, shame, national embarrassment...

Reclaiming nudity by women has special meaning under circumstances where women's bodies have been abused or raped as weapons of war or repression. In Iran, for example, young virgins were raped before execution to prevent them from going to heaven. The Armed Islamic Group (GIA) carried out mass rapes in the 1990s in Algeria as part of its terror campaign. In response, nudity has been used to confront armed and repressive forces from the Indian subcontinent to Africa.

Nude protest is not confined to the west. Some of the most famous examples of nude protest are from elsewhere. Aliaa Magda Elmahdy in Egypt and Amina Sboui in Tunisia are cases in point. In China, supporters of Ai Weiwei have been posing naked after the Chinese government accused the artist of pornography for a series of nude photos. Hundreds of women in Niger Delta staged a topless protest against non-implementation of an existing agreement by Shell. Late last year in Argentina, an estimated 7,000 women, some of whom were topless, stormed a cathedral demanding women's autonomy. A "bare buttocks" women's protest took place in Swaziland in 2000 to oppose evictions by the king's brother. In March last year, a women's group in Orissa, India staged a semi-nude protest against land acquisition for a proposed steel plant... There have been nude protests in many places for everything from opposition to war to a defence of the environment.

An incidental positive outcome of this form of protest is a more open and relaxed attitude towards nudity but nude protest is a means of political protest that goes beyond the issue of nudity. Nude protest challenges discrimination with important implications for other aspects of women's lives - much of which have to do with control and suppression. Those who say that there are more important fights for justice other than nudity miss this important fact. A woman's control over her

own body translates into her being considered a real and distinct human being separate from the men who “own” her. This translates into more freedoms such as the freedom to study what she wants, work where she wants, visit friends and family when she wants, travel without permission, mix freely with members of the opposite sex, have the right to divorce and child custody, marry whom she wants, choose to be an atheist if she wants, have sex when she wants, and refuse sex when she wants, as well as to have the right to food, clothing and healthcare irrespective of how she is perceived by her male guardian or the society. In a society where women have ownership of their own bodies, everything from veiling to Female Genital Mutilation, stonings and honour killings become impermissible.

Nude protest aids in the fight for women’s liberation in one of the key battlefields – her body. Whilst women’s oppression is fundamentally a product of the economic and social system, which benefits from the commodification and objectification of women as well as sexual division in the production process, it is also the product of religious values and chauvinistic traditions and beliefs. Nude protest challenges the status quo.

Those who say nude protest is not the task of Communists and the Left have no clue about the role and responsibility of the Left. Class struggle does not take place in factories alone. Workers also include women with a myriad of problems many related to the control and suppression of their bodies. Women’s inequality springs from the same system that is responsible for workers’ inequality.

If the measure of a society’s freedom is based on women’s freedom, then nudity’s political challenge is an important one. Detractors who argue that nude protest pushes the women’s liberation movement backwards, including those who consider themselves progressive, Left and “veteran” women’s rights campaigners, equate women’s nudity with obscenity and indignity and cannot see its political, revolutionary, taboo-breaking, liberating and deeply humanising effects.

And the closer the nudity, the more uncomfortable. For many Egyptians, Aliaa Magda Elmahdy was said to embarrass the Egyptian revolution. Amina Sboui was blamed for pushing back the Tunisian women’s liberation movement. I have been accused of pushing back the women’s liberation movement in Iran and putting women’s rights campaigners in Iran at risk. No repressive regime needs excuses to suppress and deny the rights of women. It is absurd to blame the Islamic regime of Iran’s misogyny on those of us who resist. I have also been accused of embarrassing the Left which will apparently face further accusations of “immorality” as a result of my nudity.

Nothing brings out the misogynists from their hiding places like nudity.

This discomfort means that the same rules don’t apply when it comes to an analysis of nude political protest. The Ukrainian revolution is not denigrated for being “white” and “western” but FEMEN (whatever your opinion on the group) is often referred to in this way. The relatively small numbers of nude protestors are highlighted when what matters are not numbers per se but significance and effect. Many taboo-breaking protests and demands were raised and organised by a minority, an avant-garde who first led the way. Also, geographical location not politics is stressed when it comes to nude protest. Distinctions are made, for example, between Aliaa’s nude protest in Egypt versus her actions in Stockholm and our 8 March nude protest in Paris. The actions of Islamists have a global impact and so does nude protest irrespective of where it takes place. Our nude protest on 8 March in Paris has been hotly debated amongst Iranians from Tehran to London and Islamists have rioted in Kolkata when photos of our protest were published in a local paper.

If Occupy Wall Street can take the form and content of Tahrir Square, why not nude protest? In fact, the material bases of the protests, including nudity, are similar. Those who fail to see the importance of nude protests addressing deep-rooted discrimination against women don’t see the deep-seated

discrimination in the first place.

Even in a majority of western countries, women still cannot appear topless in beaches or parks as can men. Breastfeeding in many public places is considered taboo. Facebook doesn't allow nipples to be seen. Earlier this year, Facebook temporarily shut down a French museum's page after it uploaded one such image. Recently, a French politician called for censoring a children's book "Everybody Get Naked", which shows people from all walks of life taking off their clothes in an aim to calm children's fears about their own bodies. At our 8 March nude protest with Amina Sboui and Aliaa Magda Elmahdy we were kettled in, with a large number of police brought to arrest us. We were shouted at, grabbed, and arrested. At the station, the police wrote down all our personal details as well as the slogans we had on our bodies, what we chanted, and what flags we carried... We were held for several hours and chastised for wasting police time. This gives nude protest universal significance.

Detractors who criticise nude protests taking place in the west ignore the real risks involved for those who do it in places like Egypt or Tunisia. Aliaa Magda Elmahdy and Amina Sboui were forced to leave their countries because of it.

Critics have dared me to hold my 8 March Paris protest in Iran. If I could, I would do it in Tehran's Azadi Square - and like in Paris cut out the "Allah" from the Islamic regime of Iran's flag and put my vulva in its place (pussy riot, Iranian style according to one [\[2\]](#)) but that would mean a death sentence. This type of criticism is akin to telling exiled political opponents that they must either remain silent or dissent in their countries of origin even if means death. It ignores the repression that many of us have fled from and the real risks involved with any form of protest against Islamism, especially nude protest, even when it is done outside of the Middle East and North Africa.

Opponents have called our nude protest "offensive" and "culturally inappropriate" but anything that breaks taboos and demands fundamental change will offend existing sensibilities and will be deemed inappropriate for its time.

Even so, not everyone is offended. Whilst there are many who condemn it, there are also many who vehemently support it. No culture or society is homogeneous. Those who consider nude protest as "foreign" and "culturally inappropriate" are only considering Islamism's sensibilities and values, not that of the many who resist. In the same way that there are opponents of nude protest and supporters of the veil in the west, there are also supporters of nude protest and opponents of the veil in the east. In fact more so because there is no greater opposition against Islamism and religious misogyny than from those who have lived under, survived and resisted it.

The call for free, equal and autonomous women is also a call for a free Iran, Middle East and North Africa. No society can be free without women being free.

When it is a crime to be a woman, nude protest is an important public political challenge. It says loud and clear: "Enough! No More"! "I will be nude, I will protest, and I will challenge you to your very core!"

Maryam Namazie, 8 March 2014

P.S.

*

<http://freethoughtblogs.com/maryamnamazie/2014/03/23/i-will-be-nude-i-will-protest-and-i-will-challenge-you-to-your-core/>

Footnotes

[1] http://www.salon.com/2014/01/22/6_reasons_female_nudity_can_be_powerful/

[2] <http://downedrobin.blogspot.co.uk/2014/03/pussy-riot-iranian-style.html>