

How The Handmaid's Tale dressed protests across the world

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The red-and-white costume from Margaret Atwood's novel has been donned by women from Ireland to Argentina



Women dressed as handmaids protest against US vice-president Mike Pence in Philadelphia, 23 July. Photograph: Matt Rourke/AP

When US vice-president Mike Pence visited Philadelphia on 23 July, he was greeted by a now familiar sight: [a wall of women dressed in scarlet cloaks](#), with oversize white bonnets obscuring their faces.

The outfit worn by Margaret Atwood's handmaids [in her 1985 dystopian novel The Handmaid's Tale and its recent TV adaptation](#) has been in evidence from Argentina to the US, the UK and Ireland, and has emerged as one of the most powerful current feminist symbols of protest, in a subversive inversion of its association with the oppression of women.

It has been donned [by pro-choice protesters during Ireland's successful referendum](#) to revoke the eighth amendment of its constitution and by abortion rights campaigners in Buenos Aires.



Ten handmaids escort Margaret Atwood around Britain's Hay literary festival in May. Photograph: Alamy Stock Photo

In London, protesters put on the cloak and bonnet to protest against Donald Trump's visit to the UK and the policies of his administration.

Why the handmaid's uniform has come to represent a constellation of issues affecting women is as telling as the phenomenon itself, with Atwood among those reflecting on why the costume she imagined as the most visible articulation of the subjugation of women by the imaginary state of Gilead has become such a potent medium for dissent.

The Canadian author believes the use of the handmaid's uniform is both flexible and powerful, allowing women to protest in locations where they do not have a right of audience.

What the costume is really asking viewers is: do we want to live in a slave state?

Margaret Atwood

"The handmaid's costume has been adopted by women in many countries as a symbol of protest about various issues having to do with the requisitioning of women's bodies by the state," she told the Guardian.

"It has even been used on posters in the context of the Trump-Putin relationship, with Trump as the handmaid. Because it's a visual symbol, women can use it without fear of being arrested for causing a disturbance, as they would be for shouting in places like legislatures.

"No one can accuse them of being immodest: they are well covered up. But everyone seeing these groups of women know what they mean in the context of the individual protest, whether it be Ireland, Argentina, or Arizona."

She added: "In countries that prohibit birth control and reproductive health information, the state claims ownership of women's bodies through enforced childbearing. What the costume is really asking viewers is: do we want to live in a slave state?"

First introduced in her novel in the form of "some fairytale figure in a red cloak", it is a uniform – as Atwood's heroine Offred explains – designed to be understood in terms of violent oppression and the fertility of the handmaids in a largely infertile world.

The version adopted by protesters is the one made concrete by designer Ane Crabtree for the television series of the book.

She told the Guardian: "I came at it from a very masculine, white male, 1% of the population design-mind. It was really twisted. It really did a number on my head."



A scene from the second series of the TV adaptation of The Handmaid's Tale. Photograph: MGM/Hulu

Crabtree was returning to the US, when she first saw pictures of demonstrators in Handmaid's Tale costumes on social media, she said.

"It was a nanosecond of: 'Oh my god.' I had to sit down. It didn't really occur to me it would speak to people in such a highly personal and political way, as a group. It was a beautiful re-entry into the United States, because I was struggling to understand what I thought to be a new world in the US."

Keishia Taylor is among those who first started wearing the handmaid's uniform about a year ago during the campaign to overturn [Northern Ireland's abortion law](#).

"In Ireland, it was used in context of the ban on abortion, because women had a sense that the state

thinks of us like vessels and incubators,” said Taylor.

“The image used in *The Handmaid’s Tale* cuts right to heart of the toxic relationship between church and state.

“When we started using these costumes ... we thought, we can’t sit back. So we put out a call to people who could help make the costumes, and there was a huge response. It shows this symbol strikes a chord.”



Pro-choice supporters at a Rosa rally in Londonderry, Northern Ireland. Photograph: Charles McQuillan/Getty Images

She described the physical experience of wearing the outfit, the feeling of being transformed into an object. “The bonnet makes you feel very vulnerable, because your hearing is cut off,” she said.

But it is in the US, perhaps, where the costume has been most visible, not least because the April 2017 premiere of *The Handmaid’s Tale* on television collided with efforts by US Republicans, emboldened by Trump’s election, to roll back reproductive rights and health protections for the poor.

In state capitols across the country, silent women wore the cloaks and stark white bonnets to protest against decisions being made by the majority-male representatives.

One of the women who helped organise the demonstration against Pence, Samantha Goldman, an activist with the group Refuse Fascism, said the moment the activists took off their costumes was an essential part of the protest.

“A lot of times these protests, as beautiful as they’ve been, they’ve been in the handmaid’s costume the whole time,” Goldman said.

“So there has been this permanent submission, even though people are doing it as an act of protest. We really wanted it to be like throwing the cloaks off of the white supremacy and patriarchy of this regime.”



Handmaids on the march during Donald Trump’s visit to the UK in July. Photograph: Claire Doherty//Sipa USA/Rex/Shutterstock

M’Evie Mead, director of policy and organising for the reproductive rights group Planned Parenthood Advocates in Missouri, helped organise one of the first *Handmaid’s Tale* demonstrations last summer, when the state legislature was trying to stop people with Medicaid, the federal health insurance for low-income people, from accessing Planned Parenthood health centres.

"The Handmaid's tale was being really lived out in Missouri, with those legislatures trying to take the agency of those Medicaid patients away," Mead said.

"We really wanted to jolt some attention to it and the handmaids were really effective in generating attention and press coverage."

Helen Lewis, the associate editor of the New Statesman, who is currently working on a book on the history of feminism, argues that the handmaid's outfit is effective in part because of the aesthetic impact of the scarlet cloaks in the locations where they have been employed.

"I think the reason that the costumes work so well is because where the protests are happening is places like courts, places dominated by men in black or navy suits, or parliament. They are pretty drab places, where the slash of lipstick red stands out and gives a group identity in the same way the suffragettes did 100 years ago with their purple, white and green sashes.



Activists outside Argentina's national congress, where they read a letter from Margaret Atwood last week. Photograph: Eitan Abramovich/AFP/Getty Images

It has been in Argentina, however, where the journey from Atwood's imagination to the author's own intervention in the debate about abortion has come full circle.

When dozens of demonstrators wearing the handmaid's uniform converged on the country's congress to protest, Atwood supplied a letter to be read out.

"Nobody likes abortion, even when safe and legal. It's not what any woman would choose for a happy time on Saturday night. But nobody likes women bleeding to death on the bathroom floor from illegal abortions, either. What to do?"

The answer, for many, is to put on Atwood's red cloak.

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