

Women take to the streets!

Revolt

Subversion

Emancipation

Women gather, they march, demonstrate, protest and contest. Humour and gravity combine in their determined voices. They are full of dynamism and enthusiasm, they compose hymns, chanting the lyrics to the four winds. Often in joy, sometimes in tears. Women take to the streets. We hear them and we see them. Some of them are strongly feminist, even before the word existed: they demand equality, fight gender-based oppression and violence. They are shopkeepers, workers, employees, maids, housewives, teachers, journalists, prostitutes, unemployed, intellectuals or artists, who, as such and as women, engage in liberating perspectives. Now they are taking to the streets, sitting in on main squares, in front of factories, town halls and ministries, handing out pamphlets or leading unusual actions. They often refer to the past, for history helps them fight. They build networks and connections, rely on mutual help, which makes them stronger, and create common ground. They forge a balance, fragile yet passionate, between a taste for heritage and an urge for novelty, for their creativity is significant, in the slogans, on banners, signs, placards. Their male allies are sometimes very present. At other times, on the contrary, women-only gatherings are preferred.

The fact that women take over the public space to express their anger, their revolts, their cravings for justice and for rights, is subversive in itself. Streets are usually where constant traffic flows – passers-by, walkers, consumers, craftsmen or beggars. And the fact that feminists take to the streets makes the act of protesting even more subversive. Marches against sexism and violence towards women, for the right to vote and the right to have control over one's own body, for a decent job and pay, for acknowledgment and dignity; these protests shed light on situations that are usually silenced and hidden. To talk about it on the streets, to describe it and to yell, even, opens a breach: a stunning, sometimes thunderous, outbreak of silence.

Yes, women take to the streets! This exhibition is a concrete, living, embodied way to evoke their movement. It shows and gives a voice to their claims and aspirations, their expectations and demands, the strength and imagination of these moments throughout history. To take to the streets is an emancipatory act, it bears self-expression and self-confidence: a form of liberation, power and hope.

1789-1871

Revolutions!

1789: the French Revolution is an intense and monumental moment during which women transform the streets into spaces of activism. On 5 and 6 October 1789, thousands of women head towards Versailles and demand that the King move to the capital. This event is crucial as women radically change the course of political life with their public actions. This era is revolutionary because many women participate in revolts, marches, and street blockades. Protests addressing major social challenges – especially those related to subsistence – are also political and directed at governments. These women fight for their rights and raise essential issues: is there a “universal” suffrage when women are not a part of it? Can women’s voices matter as much as men’s? These women intend to make their voices – individual and collective – heard even though attempts are made to silence them. They have specific demands and bring about new ways of engaging with public affairs. For them, taking to the streets means proclaiming their legitimacy, which has always been contested. Men in power, and men in general, presume that women belong with domestic tasks, in the household, while men keep the political sphere to themselves. Back then, the word “feminist” did not exist. Still, from the French Revolution to the Paris Commune, through the popular revolts of 1830 and 1848, we hear women’s voices rising to claim: “Men’s rights are also ours”.

The French Revolution

Several marches mark the revolutionary era. Many women protest in the streets. They bring social and political concerns into the public sphere: the issue of subsistence and citizen claims. Some come to proclaim: “The Rights of Man are also those of Woman”. Riots, gatherings, roadblocks, forced taxation, and the distribution of goods taken directly from convoys: all these actions show why women take to the streets in the name of rights and freedom, but also to change everyday life.

Echoes and references to the French Revolution

Women who take to the streets during the French Revolution show their strength and their defiance, challenging norms. They are not allegories. However, that is how the revolutionary era will be remembered for decades: with metaphors (the Marianne), symbols (the tricolour flag) and metonymies (the Phrygian cap). This primary event is so important that many women claim this revolutionary legacy through social movements and popular uprisings.

1830, July Revolution

During the “July Revolution”, which takes place on 27, 28 and 29 July 1830, women actively participate in the revolution that overthrows King Charles X. Some not only look after the injured: they help by setting up barricades. Sometimes, they even take up arms. Of course, the lithographs of that time cannot fully convey the intensity of the fight. It is violent though, as shown by the workers’ uprisings that break out in the following years, especially in Lyons, where women play a significant role.

The barricades of 1848

The Revolutions of 1848! In Paris and many big cities, street blockades engulf the streets again. The February Revolution of 1848 is part of a large European movement. But this time, it provokes a definitive overthrow of monarchy and the establishment of the Republic. Although women’s participation in the struggles is a minority, many of them fight with rifles. Some of them end up wounded and several lose their lives. Nevertheless, they fail to be considered as citizens with rights.

Long live the Commune!

“Are you going to shoot your brothers?”

On 18 March 1871, in the streets of Montmartre, some women face the troops of the Versailles government and shout at them. In so doing, they play a decisive role: soldiers bow to their demands. The event leads to a popular revolution, which erupts in different cities all over the country. These women multiply initiatives in the public sphere and they make projects, they found circles, societies and cooperatives. We find them on the barricades – and a lot of them die during the crushing of the Paris Commune.

Echoes and references to the Paris Commune

“The Commune is not dead!” Its memory resurfaces periodically, like a ghost. Whether it is the organisation of labour liberated from capital, an emancipatory school system, a shared art, or the struggle for women’s rights, the Paris Commune is still inspiring. It stands as a symbol of transmission across generations. In protest marches, its vivid references appear on banners and signs. Louise Michel remains its major figure.

1880-1936

Conquering citizenship

The figure of Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* has never stopped multiplying into many avatars. It seems quite paradoxical: at the exact moment when Marianne dashes forward with the wind blowing in her hair and proudly brandishes the French flag, women do not have any political representation; they are considered inferior and do not have access to citizenship. The suffragists' protests in France – though not as large and visible as those in the United States or the United Kingdom – play a key role in the history of French feminism and in the conquest of women's rights. From the end of the 19th century, feminist activists, inspired by waves of international claims, hold rallies for civil rights. On 14 July 1881, Hubertine Auclert calls for women to "take the Bastille." These early protests appear in the form of public meetings, petitions and awareness campaigns, even if it is still difficult to take to the streets. Few are those who venture to do it, among them Madeleine Pelletier or Louise Weiss. The road to citizenship is full of pitfalls caused by the senators' bitter opposition: a majority considering that women are not rational enough or educated enough to participate in the political life. In such a context, demonstrations are an opportunity to show the risks taken, the engaged body, the repression and the arrests.

Demands for equality

1882: for the first time, the word "feminist" emerges with the same meaning as today's. Suffragist Hubertine Auclert is the one who coins it and gives it its subversive power. But feminists hesitate to take to the streets. They sneak in small gatherings here and there, or in organisations of illegal outdoor votes, and join in a march in Paris on 5 July 1914 where between 2,000 and 6,000 people gather. Women demand not only the right to vote, but also full citizenship. However, these enterprises remain small in comparison with the big suffragist processions in Great Britain and the United States.

A British model?

As for the British suffragettes, they demonstrate en masse, practising civil disobedience, putting themselves in danger, risking their bodies: exposed, abused and tortured bodies. In comparison to France, the participation rate in the protests is surreal: in London, on 21 June 1908, 500,000 people converge to Hyde Park to claim for universal suffrage. The artists' mobilisation gives birth to impressive marches. Symbolic colours are raised everywhere: green for hope, white for purity and violet for dignity: Green White Violet – Give Women Votes.

Across the Atlantic

The suffragists' demonstrations in the United States are marked by determined actions as well. The movement grows bigger from the 1840s, with emblematic figures such as Susan B. Anthony or Elizabeth Cady Stanton. In 1848, the Seneca Falls Convention marks a turning point: its women-participants claim that the right to vote is essential to equality. In the 1910s, spectacular demonstrations, such as the Women Suffrage Procession in Washington D.C., draw national attention as well as worldwide solidarity. These actions help to exert pressure on the Congress, finally leading to the adoption of the 19th amendment in 1920.

Tenacity in the post-war years

“French women want to vote but the Senate does not want them to.” Indeed, the upper chamber systematically refuses to give women the right to vote. In France, feminists become bolder: they are more willing to take to the streets. The gatherings are multiplying, though most of the time they are repressed and lead to arrests. Some of the feminists go all over the streets in buses or in cars, with their banners and their signs, their pamphlets and their placards. Others cross the country to lead a joyful yet intensive propaganda. Their initiatives become more and more original.

1936-1968

Liberations: Popular Front, war and emancipation movements

From one general strike to another, from one event to another: the time period that begins in 1936 and goes until May 1968 is punctuated by powerful moments. The strike, a demonstration of working-class anger, feeds from the awareness of exploitation and fuels it at the same time. The wish for social justice and the struggle for emancipation is always expressed throughout those movements. Could these fights share a common cause? Could the fight for feminism and the proletariat go hand in hand? These multifaceted women are put to the test during this period punctuated by wars and conflicts. They are then allowed to be more than their "husband's wives". They occupy a unique position, they protest and fight. During the Second World War, women protest in spite of danger and resist. During the Libération, some of them take to the barricades. Subsequently, their determination allows them to have more rights, the right to vote in particular, which has been claimed for a long time: the citizenship of women is finally recognised. In the following years, many women, factory workers, employees or housewives take to the streets. During the Algerian war, the streets fill up with movements, marches and dissent

- women take part in them, but are sometimes rendered invisible or violently repressed. And finally, during May 68, everything is overturned when women open up the marches, denounce the forms of violence that they are trying to defuse, and try to destroy every hierarchy, including the patriarchy.

The Popular Front

They raise their fists. They wear the red star and Phrygian cap. Their songs intertwine "La Marseillaise" and "L'Internationale". In the streets, one sees processions of workers, employees, or housekeepers. They sometimes wave the symbols of their trade: cleaning ladies come with their sweeping brushes. The strike starts: everything stops. The Popular Front highlights the role of women in major social mobilisations. A powerful gesture is created, profoundly anti-fascist, in moments when joy and gravity mix.

During the war

War does not seem to be compatible with the streets being taken and protests in broad daylight. However, defying the occupation and authorities, many women get organised and gather in different cities and all over the country to protest against the cost of living and food shortages. Among these acts of resistance, there are also these labour strikes, especially the miners, whose spouses, sisters and mothers support by protesting. Some of them paid for it with their lives, executed by Nazis.

Libération!

Women in the streets are those who set barricades up for the Libération and engage in final fights that create unexpected images. These are the resistant women who march in freed cities. Lucie Aubrac talks about those women, some of whom march with dignity, with a renewed sense of freedom during the big parade of summer 1944: "now that the entire country is but a large battlefield, women in France ensure continuity and the flame of resistance."

Algerian War of Independence

The wars of decolonisation also lead to strong movements, still little-known today.

Who remembers the Algerian women protesting on 17 October 1961? They are subjected to deadly police brutality. What about these same women, anxious to find their husbands, their brothers or their friends? "The Seine turned red that day", wrote Leïla Sebbar. A few months later, on 8 February 1962, several women, communists activists, are among the victims of the repression at the Charonne subway station. The protests, forbidden at the time, are first and foremost tragic events.

May-June 1968

Not only are they protesting, but they also are in charge of security: this is unheard of. They sit in the streets, during improvised sit-ins, which is unusual at the time. They wave flags, give speeches on the squares and at crossroads, sing on the pavements in front of the occupied factories, offices and stores. During May and June 1968, women are at the core of the general strike which, they know, shows contradictions. Indeed, the movement, is run by men, which is something they will denounce later on.

1968, year of global revolutions

Around the world, 1968 stands as a revolutionary year. The Chinese revolution, the Cuban experience and the Vietnamese resistance are seen like openings that undermine the established order and shatter the hegemonies. East and West, the two blocks are challenged, which destabilises and weakens them. Everywhere, the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the troops of the Warsaw Pact is contested, like the oppression in Mexico. In the years to come, people will keep saying: "This is only the beginning, let's keep fighting".

1970-2000

“My body, my choice!”: Major battles

It is indeed an effervescent period that emerges in the 1970s. These years give form to a new golden age of feminisms, intertwined with battles for equality: struggles against imperialism and racism, fights against discrimination, support for revolutions. Women take to the streets to snatch new rights, in particular the right to own their body and to claim it loud and clear: “My body, my choice!” The wave is huge thanks to international solidarities and connections, now bearing a new name: sisterhood. Contraception and abortion are at the core of the risky demonstrations in which subversion takes place. The Women’s Liberation Movement initiates unprecedented actions, some of which are purposefully reserved to women only. The topics are serious: violence against women, exploitative working conditions and wage inequalities. But this still leaves room for casual laughs and bursts of happiness. Such a taste for partying sets patriarchy’s teeth on edge. It is time for the rising of demands, sometimes provocative, always with original actions and ideas. Taking to the streets and public spaces induces independence of action, between hope and rage: “Don’t free us, we’ll free ourselves!”. These commitments pay off and sometimes result in laws, such as the crucial Veil Act, which recognises the progress of rights.

For abortion rights and contraception

In secret, clandestine abortions are performed, with tact and sorority, now thanks to the “*Mouvement pour la liberté de l’avortement et de la contraception (MLAC)*”: Movement for abortion and contraception rights. In the streets, women demand for abortion to be legalised. On the banners, their words call for free and reimbursed birth control as well as abortion, including for minors and immigrants. The activists claim it at the top of their lungs in demonstrations: abortion is not a crime, it is a right. Hence: “One doesn’t beg for a fair right, one fights for it.”

Stagings, humour and parties

Feminists organise parties, set unique initiatives up, display humour and happiness: they are ready. Ready to break the stranglehold, to mock, to provoke, to break with convention, to smash the ready-to-wear norms, to unleash and unchain novelty, to take to and occupy the streets. Ready to innovate as well, by sometimes choosing a “women-only” approach: in order to experience the joy of being together and gathering, the enthusiasm of different times when fighting is important and so is singing, hugging and running in the freed streets.

International solidarity

Internationalism is the long-standing matrix of feminisms, reinforced by mutual assistance. In the 1970s, this internationalist outlook is, more than ever, a guiding principle. Feminist solidarity comes forward during dictatorships such as Salazarism and Francoism. It supports the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, mothers who desperately want to know what their missing sons have become. It also supports the women in Chile after the coup d'état of 1973.

The Rouen trial

On 6 October 1979, thousands of women demonstrate in Paris for the right of abortion.

Among them, over 300 are from Rouen.

But they are not satisfied with the report published in *L'Humanité*, and ask to meet its director, Roland Leroy. However, they are met by a heavy-handed security force. They are insulted and one of them is left injured.

This leads to a trial that also reflects the tensions between feminist movements and part of the left. Communist activists testify alongside the plaintiff, expressing all at once solidarity and sisterhood.

Since the 2000s

Don't Back Down!

Contemporary movements

Launched by the World March of Women in 2000, this sequence that continues to this day highlights how feminism is more active, original and determined than ever. Now it addresses casual sexism and still fights for women's rights. In 2011, the "Slut Walk" movement, born in Toronto, encourages women to claim their right to dress as they want without the fear of being assaulted. In 2017, "Me Too" gains an inconsiderable sweep, supporting millions of women to share their experiences of harassment and sexual assault. These massive mobilisations lead to global awareness of gender-based violence. Marches for women's rights, like the Women's March in the United States, have gathered millions of participants advocating for equal pay, abortion rights, and the fight against violence. In many countries such as in Poland and Argentina, protests take place in defence of reproductive rights. Intersectional movements are gaining visibility shedding light on the struggles of racialised women, LGBTQ+ women and women coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. These protests raise public awareness of injustice and influence legislative and social changes, emphasising the importance of feminist solidarity. Struggles continue with demands growing ever more inclusive.

At the intersection of oppressions

"All of us women", "us too": at the start of the 21st century, a branch of feminism advocates for intersectionality, wishing not to overlook any form of discrimination.

The intersection of oppressions is acknowledged and analysed. Class domination, sexist alienation, systemic racism, transphobia, ableism: we're all fighting the same battle! Yet, that does not go without some divisions within the multiple and layered forms of feminisms - sometimes opposed - on topics such as prostitution, the hijab or the LGBTQ+ movement.

On the walls

“Artivism” which combines art and activism is another way for feminists to take to the streets. Performances, street art, wall paintings against harassment, posters against femicides: inventiveness and creativity merge with the seriousness of the causes they stand up for. The poetic dimension is clear. It resonates with the words of the writer Audre Lorde: for women, “poetry is not a luxury but a vital necessity.” From subversion to satire, humour always works as a powerful weapon.

Contemporary solidarity

Women’s marches have truly become international. Now, the struggles in Mexico and in Poland resonate in Paris or Tokyo. Started in Argentina and Spain, initiatives like feminist strikes are globalised. Words are coined to describe violence against women, especially femicides, and ways to resist it. Iranian women’s protests are admirable and their fight strengthens others. Everywhere in the world, and not only in Tehran, a slogan resonates in different forms: “Woman, Life, Freedom”.

Strikes and social movements

Silk workers from Lyons, textile and arms factories workers, sardine cannery workers from Douarnenez, miner's wives in Nord and Pas-de-Calais, store employees, cabin crew members, nurses, nursing assistants...: the women's strikes are often linked to claims for equal pay, proper working conditions and new labour laws. From the early days of the strikes at the end of the 19th century to the Yellow vests protests, women are walking at the head of the processions and cause a breach in the establishment that they contribute to shake.

Bodies and sex

Bodies and sexuality are at the core of feminist fights because they affect the independence, the freedom and the equality of women. The objectification of the female body and the control of their sexual and reproductive choices as well as the awareness on gender-based violence reveal systemic inequalities. By laying claim to the right to have control over their own body and live their sexuality without being judged, feminists call into question patriarchal norms which restrain their power to act and their dignity. As the demonstrations go by, their joy expresses the happiness in campaigning for freedom.

Warding off fear: Reclaiming the streets and the night

Since the 1970's, feminist night walks have enabled women to ward off fear of rape and violence of all kinds. They increase inside and outside Paris, with this simple and strong wish: "We want to go out at night without risk and without protectors." These are mostly women-only protests, which mark the determination to take to the streets and boulevards with their heads held high, usually singing; to regain their bodies, footing and place in a space where women are too often harassed, humiliated and assaulted.

An international history of 8 March

The origins of the 8 March are in parts legendary and remain shrouded in mystery.

Within the labour movement, a story was told for a long time about 8 March 1857 - a labour strike of women in the US that never actually existed. This idea was spread by the German revolutionary Clara Zetkin before the First World War. On the 8 March, a march of women in Petrograd became the starting point of the revolution that overthrew the tsar. Over the years, 8 March became an international day to celebrate and defend women's rights and their dignity.

Posters on the walls

Feminist posters play an essential part in spreading messages of resistance and emancipation. Through their visual power, they turn ideas into symbols and encourage people to take action. Whether they are denouncing violence against women, asking for equality, or celebrating women's rights, they manage to be eye-catching and thought-provoking. Thanks to their use of powerful slogans and bold visuals, blending both humour and earnestness, they become mobilisation tools that reinforce feminist struggles in the public space.

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