

Looks

Since the global Women's March of 2017, a 'feminist look' has become widely recognizable through the invention of the 'pussy hat': a knitted or crocheted pink hat with two corner 'peaks' that resemble small ears – or it could be a female vulva. The adoption of the hat by thousands of women and non-binary people on the march and around the world subsequently has provided a visual statement of mass protest. Its handmade status speaks to a long history of women's craft skills, and its name contests and de-stigmatizes Donald Trump's comments about 'grabbing women by the pussy' which were widely reported during his presidential campaign. Yet fashion has long been a particularly loaded and contested site of feminist 'things'. Women's bodies have been physically and symbolically injured and constrained by forms of dress designed to immobilize, to please men and objectify female sexual attributes, or to demonstrate women's purity and modesty. From 'rational dress' to pussy hats, clothing has been a site of feminist challenge and subversion.

When I would play with the little boys in Bryant Park
although you said it was rough and unladylike, that was
feminism. When I took off my veil or gloves whenever

your back was turned or when I stayed in my room for two days rather than put on stays [a tight-fitting corset], that was feminism. When I got out of paying calls to go riding or sailing, that was feminism. When I would go to college, in spite of your protests, that was feminism. When I kept to regular hours of work in spite of protests that I was 'selfish', that was feminism. When I had a baby when I wanted one, in spite of protests that I was not selfish enough, that was feminism.¹

This was how American ethnographer and anthropologist Elsie Clews Parsons (1875–1941) recounted answering her mother's pained question 'What *is* feminism?' Parsons made her adolescent protests at stays, gloves and veil centre stage in her acts of rebellion, alongside education, meaningful work and reproductive freedom.

The image of the trousered, hatless or braless woman has long been centre stage in the visual imagery of 'the feminist'. Figures such as the French writer George Sand (1804–76) captured public notoriety by adopting male dress, claiming it was both economic and practical. From 1800, Parisian women had to apply for a police permit to wear men's clothes, making Sand's choice of dress subversive. Sand had no permit, but was widely ridiculed for her cross-dressing. Her fellow author Victor Hugo commented satirically, 'George Sand cannot determine whether she is male or female. I entertain a high regard for all my colleagues, but it is not my place to decide whether she is my sister or my brother.'²

For Elsie Parsons, it was not only her resistance to

conventional fashion but also a visible act of consumption – smoking a cigarette – that carried the strongest connotations of how it felt and looked to be a feminist. George Sand had controversially combined smoking (in her case, cigars and a hookah) with her rebellion against feminine dress. In the twentieth century, Parsons also encountered a hostile environment. Her *Journal of a Feminist*, penned in the 1910s but unpublished until 1994, described again and again her efforts to smoke in American restaurants, stations and train carriages. She was frequently forbidden, but nonetheless found that as a college-educated white woman she had considerable freedoms. Parsons was able to smoke, wear trousers and roam the American South-West, recording Native American folklore. Her anthropological observations led her to see social conventions as malleable and externally imposed. Daringly, she extended this to her own gender: 'this morning perhaps I may feel like a male; let me act like one. This afternoon I may feel like a female; let me act like one. At midday or midnight I may feel sexless; let me therefore act sexlessly.' Clearly, the twenty-first century 'discovery' of gender fluidity has resonances in the past, even if naming it as 'trans' is relatively recent.

In this chapter, I will explore the role of fashion and bodies within feminist activism. Twenty-first-century controversies over the veil and 'burkini', as well as the obsessive media scrutiny of the clothes of public figures such as Hillary Clinton, reminds us of the central place of women's clothes in delineating their 'place' in society. Choosing to look different is an act of revolutionary potential. In addition to subverting dress norms, feminists have also problematized ideas of

who is doing the 'looking'. In the 1970s, activists identified the 'male gaze' as a major oppressive feature of art, culture and social life, and adopted their own practices of subversive looking. In 1986, feminist scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty took this concept further when she authored a powerful critique of the failure of 'Western' feminism to understand and respond to the power inequalities faced by Third World women, titled 'Under Western Eyes'.³ The idea of 'a look' can thus take many forms and touches on some critical elements to feminist thinking and practice.

We start by focusing on the rise of the 'new woman' in the late nineteenth century, a self-supporting, confident woman whose search for selfhood took her beyond the family and into realms of the workplace, street and legislature. This iconic figure – short-haired and strong-minded – was popularized across the world, as British, Japanese, Chinese, New Zealand and Russian women, to name just a selection, explored 'modern' ways of being. The 'new woman' was closely associated with dress reform and iconoclasm in terms of the management of her hair and body. As we'll see, the activists of women's liberation in the 1970s and 80s also adopted a 'feminist look', associated with dressing for their own or other women's pleasure.

We then turn to another form of dress – the deeply contested act of veiling, spanning different cultural and religious traditions. Despite divisions over its meaning, I argue that coverings such as the veil, headscarf or *chador* are capable of being both empowering and constraining for women. Finally, I reflect on the problems dress reform has posed in fuelling stereotypes of 'mannish' or doctrinaire feminists, creating

cliques and insider groups, and giving expression to the exclusions of class and race that have sometimes emerged in the wake of a 'feminist look'.

Beauty, Fashion and Politics

To be fashionable or beautiful has often been a tool for women seeking to exercise power. Feminists have faced dilemmas over whether to gain the social advantages of dress conformity or risk the losses of refusing to look like everyone else. In the Philippines, for example, the experience of Spanish colonial settlement (1521–1898) and American colonial rule (1898–1946) created a complex environment for feminists in which fashion took centre stage. There were calls for Filipina women's enfranchisement from the late nineteenth century, though most women active in public life preferred to organize through the socially conservative 'club movement' where suffrage was low profile. The political practices of the 'clubwomen' were characterized by conservative norms of domesticated femininity and modest dress. Clubwomen found it useful to present themselves as conventionally maternal, respectable and feminine in appearance, to aid their campaigns to support women's health and diet during pregnancy, and to lower child mortality. In this context, the colonial Spanish celebration of motherhood as central to femininity was powerful even amongst educated and active women who were seeking new roles.

Despite Filipina women's political experience and seriousness, the public careers of women were frequently established through their looks. Beauty contests were an important means by which Filipina women gained public profile. Many

suffragists, clubwomen and journalists were declared Carnival Queens, and posed in glamorous costumes.⁴ The ability to adopt conventional feminine beauty was a powerful means of gaining civic prominence for women.

The replacement of Spanish by American rule in 1898 brought calls for modernization of the Philippines, through women's greater access to education and their eventual suffrage. Like many colonial powers, however, the Americans found it hard to imagine a world in which Filipina women voted before American women. While some white American women were enfranchised in frontier and Western territories such as Wyoming, Colorado and Utah in the late nineteenth century, adult women were not fully enfranchised in the United States until 1920, and racist Jim Crow legislation after this date limited the voting rights of African American and Native American women and men. This may explain why a Filipina campaign for suffrage only emerged in an organized form after 1918, when the American women's suffrage movement had achieved victory in many states and was confident of overall success. For Filipina women, asking for the vote posed a complex choice since women's suffrage was often voiced in terms of Western women's rights and thus risked labelling Filipina women as cooperators with the colonial power. The nationalist movement was reluctant to prioritize women's suffrage, and some key figures opposed it entirely, preferring to associate women with motherhood and the home. This was not an easy landscape to navigate for feminists, and personal appearance remained a key resource.

Female activists in this national context had to make choices about their dress, as well as decide their stance on



Figure 5.1

Filipina suffragist, diplomat and philanthropist Trinidad Fernandez Legarda as Queen of the Manila Carnival, 1924

dress reform. Male politicians in the Philippines, as in many other colonial settings, found it expedient to adopt mostly 'Western' dress, while women active in public life were often expected to wear 'traditional' or folk attire. In the Philippines, there was much feminist resistance to the cumbersome colonial Spanish traditions of blouse (*camisa*), shawl (*pañuelo*) and tunic (*terno*), which featured impractical starched butterfly sleeves. This so-called 'Maria Clara' dress, it was argued, was likely to cause accidents in workplaces and schools, and prevented women from taking part in sport. It also had a tendency to collapse into a sodden mess in the rain. Nonetheless, Filipina feminists such as Pilar Hidalgo Lim (1893–1973) and Trinidad Fernandez Legarda (1899–1998) were aware of the need to distance themselves from the 'Western' connotations of feminism, and they consistently adopted this dress for public events. They were highly critical of 'Maria Clara's' connotations of domestic obedience and confinement but were careful not to appear too American or too transgressive in their 'new womanhood'. This pragmatic choice limited the extent to which they could subvert conservative norms about women's 'natural' place in the world but did ensure resolution of the tensions between colonial and nationalist versions of Filipina feminism. Women's suffrage became a key feminist goal and was achieved through a resounding endorsement in a national referendum in 1937.

Rational Dress and Fashion Heterodoxy

Filipina strategies of cautious conventionality were echoed in other contexts. In the United States, the dress reformer and journalist Amelia Bloomer (1818–94) began a controversial

campaign for women to wear loose-fitting trousers under a knee-length skirt in 1849, a year after women all over the world had participated enthusiastically in the revolutionary anti-monarchy struggles of 1848 and American women had met to discuss suffrage at Seneca Falls. Bloomer managed to convince some women that for practical and health reasons wearing the Victorian narrow-waisted dress, long petticoats and boned corset should be abandoned. Her patterns, published in her journal *The Lily*, were in high demand, and shops began to stock 'rational' outfits. Some activists of this period, however, believed that Bloomer's engagement with the world of fashion could not be combined with serious political commitments to reform. Women's rights activist Angelina Grimké (1805–79), who shared Bloomer's commitments to abolitionism and women's rights, opted for 'plain' dressing, refusing frills and silk stockings due to her understanding of Biblical sanctions on fashion: 'My friends tell me that I render myself ridiculous,' she wrote in her diary, but she remained convinced of her 'high and holy calling'.⁵ For others, the enormous public outcry over Bloomer's new look became a distraction and media frenzy. Suffragist and abolitionist Mrs Paulina Kellogg Wright Davis (1813–76) consciously dressed to 'remove the idea that all women's rights women are horrid old frights with beards and mustaches'. She had been caricatured as monstrous when she became involved in women's rights conventions in the 1850s. She noted that her audiences were expecting 'a coarse, masculine, overbearing, disagreeable person; with a dirty house, a neglected family and a hen-pecked husband'. They were surprised at her being a 'fair, delicate-looking woman, with gentle manners, and a low voice'.⁶



Figure 5.2
Lithograph of 'The Bloomer Costume', 1851

Nonetheless, Bloomer's calls for change, in the name of health and hygiene, were to have a long shelf life, particularly when the global transmission of feminist ideas brought them into dialogue with alternative dress traditions. In 1902, Japanese journalist Hani Motoko (1873–1957) contributed two articles to the *Fujin shinpō* (*Women's Herald*), a periodical published by the Japanese branch of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Motoko focused on hygiene in relation to women's clothing; she promoted 'reformed' clothing, which combined the Japanese kimono with elements of Western clothing to allow women more physical movement.

The WCTU was dominated by European and North American activists, who were posted overseas to promote ideas of moral purity and women's moral leadership. Alongside control of alcohol, they foregrounded women's social service, and also worked to control and prevent prostitution. This meshed well with the Meiji-era Japanese state's goals to 'modernize' Japan, with a particular focus on modern and efficient motherhood. The WCTU widely promoted comfortable alternatives to the stiff, cumbersome kimono and obi (belt). But there were limits to how far women could be included in Meiji reform. An early Meiji regulation in the year of Motoko's birth had forbidden Japanese women to cut their hair short, and there was always tension between the desire to embrace new fashions and the need for women to personify and embody Japanese traditions.

Motoko's interest in new forms of clothing was mirrored around the world, with dress-reform campaigners arguing that women no longer needed to wear long and bulky skirts, starched collars, gloves and hats. Instead, they embraced



Figure 5.3
Māori dress reformers in rational dress, c. 1906

knickerbockers, split-toed socks, and divided or ankle-length skirts. In New Zealand, women had been given the national parliamentary vote in 1893; the following year, the New Zealand Rational Dress Association was formed, demanding that women be permitted to abandon the corsets that constricted their movement and breathing. Of course, working-class women had never adopted items such as corsets to the same extent as middle- and upper-class women. Yet it was mostly richer or socially powerful women – who could afford to be seen as unrespectable – who championed new dress formats. In New Zealand, this extended to the Māori community, where elite women also embraced rational dress on occasion. While some saw these measures as straightforward health reforms, others linked them to women's wider demands for freedom to move freely in public spaces, to bicycle and to play sport. The New Zealand branch of the WCTU supported rational dress, though some of the controversial trouser-outfits adopted by the most liberated clashed with the WCTU commitment to modesty and purity.

The dress reformers were highly visible in the global imagining of the 'new woman', a potent symbol of social change and gender disorder in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. 'New women' were constantly caricatured in the press as unfashionable, bloomer-wearing bicyclists. But by the 1920s, what had been a 'feminist look' had become more prominent in mainstream culture. Where earlier 'new women' had been laughed at for tweed knickerbockers and uncorseted bosoms, by the 1920s shorter skirts, simpler underwear and short hair had become much more widely adopted by women who enjoyed the new physical freedoms offered by

such fashions. For interwar 'new women', self-expression was achieved not only through traditional modes of activism such as joining political associations, but also through consumption of the resources offered by popular culture that moved relatively easily across national borders – cinema, radio, dancing and magazines. Japanese 'new women' and 'modern girls' for example, combined ambitious self-cultivation through their increasing access to education with new accessories of selfhood: the cloche hat, one-piece dress and face powder associated with Western consumerism.⁷ In other settings, more hybrid versions of 'modern womanhood' emerged, which used fashion to make a claim to freedoms and agency. Historian Dorothy Ko has described the adoption of Western-style high heels in 1920s Shanghai, worn with the body-hugging, high-collared *qipao* dress. Some Chinese women of the early republic designed shoes that could accommodate and make attractive recently unbound feet.⁸ 'New women' were imagined as mobile, on streets and in shops, or gaining independence through paid employment.

The 'new woman' and 'modern girl' phenomena raise important questions about how far these new developments can be linked to feminisms. Certainly, not all interwar women with bobbed hair should be read as making a political statement, and some feminists were critical of the hedonism and narcissism they associated with new fashions. Nonetheless, to associate feminists with the clichés of 'blue-stockings' – ill-dressed and sexually unfulfilled – is to ignore the rich experiments with dress and self-presentation that marked the empowerment of women around the world.

Dress could also have more direct political uses. Suffrage

activists deployed what historian Carol Mattingly has termed a 'rhetoric of dress' in adopting colours and styles that had political meanings. Suffrage activists sometimes also selected clothing for its protective and practical properties; padded dresses and robust hats prevented the assaults of policemen and onlookers. Hat pins and fans might form weapons of defence; low-heeled shoes made swift escapes more feasible. Arrested suffragists in Britain were quick to use their clothing to subvert prosecution. Women being held in custody exchanged clothing in order to make it impossible to tally police testimony – which relied heavily on the visual description of clothes – to the individual in the dock. Moreover, the class advantages of fashionable dress sometimes provided protection from arrest, allowing militant women to move into and out of the sites of their protests due to police unwillingness to confront conventionally dressed middle- and upper-class women. Suffrage activists sought to maintain respectability by being 'dainty and precise' in their dress, and to politicize qualities of conventional femininity.⁹

The Look of Liberation

Some of the strategies of early-twentieth-century activists were repeated many decades later. The Turkish feminist Gul Ozyegin recalled her efforts with other feminists in giving out lapel pins decorated with large purple beads in 1980s Ankara. Recalling the offensive properties of suffragist hat pins and fans, these pins were intended for use by women against men seeking to touch their bodies on public transport. Joining a strong tradition of women's self-defence activism, the lapel pin provided a meaningful, useable and visible marker

of defiance for Turkish women.¹⁰ It could also evoke recognition and community-building amongst feminists, as a colour-coded signal of membership of the women's movement.

However, many feminist activists of the later twentieth century were sceptical about the strategies and choices made by earlier feminists. One of the areas of conflict was over the dress code of feminism. Early-twentieth-century suffragists, with their strategic adoption of conventional femininity and often bourgeois or traditional dress, seemed unwilling to challenge male power to impose uncomfortable fashions and physical limitations on women. The everyday subversions of the mid-nineteenth-century dress-reform movement were closer in spirit to the women's liberation determination to discard all that was conventionally feminine.

Marie-Thérèse McGivern, a Belfast-based feminist, recalled that in the 1970s:

We didn't wear make-up, that was kind of seen as, that was the patriarchy forcing us to wear make-up. We didn't wear high heels, so good sensible shoes, always kind of good flat shoes, no high heels in those days . . . We weren't wearing tight fitting clothes and we were wearing comfortable clothes, we weren't dressing for men any more.

McGivern was quick to stress that this did not mean looking masculine: 'we were stylish because in a sense we were women, so the earrings were, you know, got more and more ornate, you know, the hair got more and more punked up and red.'¹¹ The DIY ethos of punk in the 1970s suited the women's movement, and could be combined with the recovery of women's traditional crafts such as knitting and patchwork.

McGivern recalled wearing 'padded jackets made of quite bright fabrics, often patchworked . . . they were lovely jackets, but again very boxy, they weren't kind of fitted or anything.' These jackets referenced the visual aesthetic of Maoist China, in a deliberate nod to the importance of socialist traditions to the women's liberation movement. Mao had written in 1961:

China's daughters have high aspiring minds
They love their uniforms not silks and satins.¹²

The Chinese cotton jacket was borrowed and reworked to become, a 'feminist look' for women in Belfast, and a statement of refusing to present female bodies for male approval.

Women's liberation activists juxtaposed styles, creating subversive looks by placing work boots alongside dresses. Their clothes featured slogans; the t-shirts worn by the Dartmouth College Pyrofeminist Group in the late-1970s United States featured the slogan BTMFD – 'burn the motherfucker down'.¹³ Sue Katz, a member of the Boston-based working-class lesbian group, Stick-It-In-The-Wall-Motherfucker Collective, recalls wearing leathers, and desperately desiring the transgressive potential offered by a pvc mini-skirt.¹⁴ Many active in the women's liberation movements found new dress options a powerful means of signalling rebellion in their everyday lives, and for some this included the gender non-conformity of cross-dressing, cultivation of body hair, and breast binding. Women commented on how satisfying it was to dress to please themselves, or to please other women, rather than following conventional or male-defined fashions. In Australia, Alison Bartlett recalled: 'It was a relief not to

wear bras. It was sensuous, and it was liberating in a functional way . . . And it saved money.' At a memorable 'Reclaim the Night' march in Brisbane, Australia, one marcher recalled a spontaneous, proud removal of shirts and t-shirts:

as the collective effect grew others were moved to strip to the waist and parade proudly through the city streets and over [Victoria] bridge. Old and young, gross and scrawny; breasts were swinging and floating, sitting up and looking out, falling languorously and jostling excitedly . . . The police looked more vulnerable in their protective clothing and weaponry, as if they themselves might be in need of protection from the naked breasts unleashed in the street.

For her, this act was 'luxurious, and subversive, and kind of sexy,' leaving the police riot gear looking absurd.¹⁵ The 'feminist look', then, was not just a new wardrobe, but extended to thinking about women's uses of body posture, and placing oneself in physical or public space.

At the Greenham Common Peace Camp in the 1980s, British women developed a characteristic style 'that was colorful, practical, and creative – close-cropped hair tied with colorful ribbons, layered loose clothing that included colorful scarves, boots, and slickers . . .' On occasion, this feminist aesthetic was abandoned in order to bypass security measures. Wearing conventional dresses and skirts, two Greenham women gained access to the base, and enjoyed watching television in a recreation room for military families. Without their ribbons and long jumpers, they were not identified as activists until they left the camp by the front gate.¹⁶

Women nearer the seats of power were similarly strategic

about what they wore. The British local government politician Valerie Wise, who channelled millions of pounds of public funding to women's groups in the 1980s, rejected dungarees in favour of a conventional skirt suit. At a time when women's liberationists were defying fashion conventions, discarding bras and refusing to shave their body hair, Wise found it 'a huge plunge' just to cut her hair short. But she was clear that conventional clothing gave her more impact as a politician: 'I wanted people to listen to what I said rather than spend ages about what I was wearing, because, you know, I didn't want the distraction of my clothes. I wasn't like a pin-up model.'¹⁷ Sara Dowse, head of the Office of Women's Affairs in the Australian civil service in the 1970s, similarly described wearing 'nothing too flash, but nothing too trendy either'. On appointment her 'look' had moved from jeans to a long denim skirt. But she noticed in the 1980s that codes had changed for 'femocrats', who now wore power suits and shoulder pads: 'the jacket was often red, red in many cultures being associated with power as well as sexuality. And equally significant . . . in its intricate, conflicted blend of power and sexuality, was the reappearance of heels.'¹⁸

The cultivation of a 'feminist look' was a visible, accessible way of creating a new community. For feminists in Belfast, fashion provided a sense of belonging by adopting a recognizable look: McGivern noted the key role played by dungarees, though she emphasized the problems of supply in 1970s Belfast. She visited New York in the late 1970s and ordered identical dungarees for the women she lived with in a collective, creating a uniformity of dress that went with her collective's ethos of self-sufficiency and sharing all resources.

Policing Dress

The politics of the 'women's liberation look' was not only about pleasing oneself but also, in some cases, about judging other women. Determined to protest sexual objectification, women's liberation movement activists targeted beauty contests across the world – the very sites that Filipina women had used to find entry points into politics. Famously, women interrupted and protested at high-profile competitions, such as the Miss America contest. In 1968, the feminist group New York Radical Women organized a picket of the pageant and performed theatrical stunts – parading sheep, for example, in protest at models being 'judged like animals at a county fair'. They refused to talk to male reporters, forcing newspapers to call in women reporters from their usual ghettos of the women's pages to cover the protest. Famously, protestors set up a 'Freedom Trash Can' full of bras, false eyelashes and copies of magazines such as *Playboy* and the *Ladies Home Journal*; though contrary to popular myth, they did not burn these items.¹⁹ This action spread to Britain, where activists threw flour bombs and disrupted proceedings with football rattles at the 1970 Miss World contest;²⁰ to New Zealand, where activists cut the power to the 1971 Miss New Zealand contest; and to Peru, where ALIMUPER (Action for the Liberation of Peruvian Women) demonstrated against the 1973 Miss Peru contest in Lima. At the local level, women also took action at countless minor contests. In Scotland, Sandie Wyles, studying for a degree at Aberdeen University, applied for a beauty contest held within the university, along with others from her women's group, as their first political action in 1975:

So we filled out the form, and I don't think they really knew what had hit them, because we all arrived in this big group, and at that time there was quite a few of them wearing dungarees, even in those days, and no make-up . . . These stewards were saying, 'Oh no, no, you can't come in, you can't come in, you've got to come in one at a time.' And we say, 'No, we're all coming in together.'²¹

Despite the strong opposition of non-feminist women at the contest, described by Wyles as 'really abusive', her women's group made their protest, were written up in a local newspaper, and went on to be active in abortion rights and 'Reclaim the Night' protests in Aberdeen. However, these iconic protests could also be seen as directed against the female models and damaging to ideas of sisterhood. Many models were working-class, and saw success in beauty contests as a source of both self-respect and access to prize money or social status. There were long-standing traditions of beauty pageants within Britain's black community, sponsored by West Indian activist Claudia Jones in London's early Notting Hill carnivals. Women's liberation protests tended to run roughshod over these dynamics of race and class. Their protests also gave credence to the idea of feminists as being against (heterosexual) eroticism and pleasure, and seeking to police other women's bodies by their own standards of acceptable behaviour. The reputation for judgementalism and rigid moralism that resulted became an obstacle to reaching wider audiences. And the compulsory dungarees or Mao-style jackets could be a confining dress code that made it harder to imagine forms of sisterhood and solidarity between women who dressed differently.

Subversive Self-Fashioning and Tensions of Class

The classed nature of clothing had been a long-standing source of tension and power-play within the women's movement. Strategies of hyper-conventionality amongst Edwardian suffrage activists proved problematic for those whose material resources did not allow for elaborate hats and dresses. The relative exclusion of working-class women from protests where fashionable clothing was required meant that many of the most visible actions of the Women's Social and Political Union were dominated by middle- and upper-class women. Nonetheless, working-class women found opportunities to join parades, sometimes dressed in recognizable clothing of their trade, such as the 'mill girl' outfit of shawl and clogs adopted on occasion by suffrage leader Annie Kenney, or the parades featuring midwives and nurses in uniform. But working-class garb was sometimes adopted as disguise or for pleasure. The well-educated and well-connected suffragist Barbara Ayrton Gould (1886–1950) adopted the dress of a 'fisher girl' in order to represent the heroic, life-saving lighthouse-keeper's daughter Grace Darling at the Women's Exhibition in 1909. There is often a sense that middle- and upper-class women enjoyed dressing up as working-class. With more serious intent, however, the aristocrat Lady Constance Lytton (1869–1923) impersonated an imaginary working-class woman, 'Jane Warton'. Lytton was frustrated at being let out of prison after her arrests in 1909, and suspected that her social rank was to blame, though the prison authorities claimed it was due to her heart condition.



Figure 5.4

Suffragist Constance Lytton disguised as 'Jane Warton', a working-class seamstress, c. 1914

When she was arrested as the dowdy Jane Warton in 1910 she was wearing

A tweed hat, a long green cloth coat, which I purchased for 8s. 6d., a woollen scarf and woollen gloves, a white silk neck-kerchief, a pair of pince-nez spectacles, a purse, a net-bag to contain some of my papers.²²

In this outfit, she was given a sentence of hard labour and, without medical inspection, was force-fed eight times. The heart condition was genuine, and Lytton suffered a heart attack from which she never fully recovered. The power of clothes to shore up class inequities in Edwardian Britain was clearly demonstrated and understood by suffragists. But the women's suffrage movement remained in many ways unwilling to challenge the conventionalities of dress. Later generations were much more iconoclastic, though issues of class continued to pervade the question of what feminists should wear.

In the late twentieth century, as women's liberation and lesbian groups developed characteristic looks, social class gave clothes cultures very different meanings to different women. Australian feminist Lebbie Hopkins recalled wearing blue and khaki overalls, which for her had strong connotations of physical autonomy: 'We had commandeered the working man's garb, indicating that our bodies were our own, to be used for our own pleasures, not for sale nor for plunder.'²³ But this may not have been so different from the earlier insensitive dressing up by privileged suffragists. The different class backgrounds of women made the class politics of the 'feminist look' painful for some. One activist in the North American feminist bookstore movement, Nett Hart, noted, 'Not all

have the economic options to say "no" when faced with coercive gendered dress codes.' Hart argued that feminist efforts to look different in 'denims and flannels' could mean simply that 'middle- and upper-class women dressed the way that working and poor women have always dressed.'²⁴ For Sue Katz, the experiments with collective ownership of clothing in her Boston collective proved problematic. Coming from an impoverished background, Katz noted that working-class and black women might have a very different relationship to clothes that made collective ownership difficult:

Many working-class white and black kids had been strictly brought up to be clean and neat and ironed – in lieu of being expensive and trendy and cosseted. Some of us had precious pieces of clothing we had saved for or splurged to buy and didn't really want to share . . .

I never wanted to share clothes. As a child growing up, virtually all my clothes were hand-me-downs . . . People who had nice new stuff all their childhoods surely didn't have the same relationship to clothes. They were cavalier about stuff knowing mommy and daddy would buy them more. The piles in the middle of the room seemed like a fun grab-bag to them.²⁵

Frances Beal's pamphlet *Double Jeopardy* (1969) also noted these tensions. She was aware that there was a long history of feminist opposition to the fashionable woman, whom she memorably described as 'spending idle hours primping and preening, obsessed with conspicuous consumption, and limiting life's functions to simply a sex role'. But Beal found no resonance with this ideal within the lives of black women:

It is idle dreaming to think of black women simply caring for their homes and children like the middle-class white model. Most black women have to work to help house, feed and clothe their families. Black women make up a substantial percentage of the black working force and this is true for the poorest black family as well as the so-called 'middle-class' family. Black women were never afforded any such phony luxuries.

Beal's insights were resonant with earlier racial exclusions. The former slave and abolitionist Sojourner Truth complained that participants at an 1870 suffrage convention were so fashionably dressed that they could not be taken seriously. 'What kind of reformers be you, with goose wings on your heads, as if you were going to fly, and dressed in such ridiculous fashion, talking about reform and women's rights?'²⁶ But white suffragists were not willing to be criticized by a former slave for their appearance. Truth, who often adopted plain Quaker dress, was personally attacked for her own appearance in the suffrage *Woman's Journal*.

Feminists, in sum, were divided over whether fashion was damaging and patriarchal or an expressive realm of pleasure, and these debates stretch back over many decades. Dress was a cultural site that many working-class and black women did not choose to politicize. As Nett Hart concluded,

women [should be allowed] the self-definition and self-determination of our own bodies. But we must be aware that the first to use that privilege will be those that are most familiar with privilege.²⁷

Men in Skirts

While women's clothing has been subject to enormous scrutiny, commercial pressure and political debate, men's dress codes have also been subject to a feminist gaze. When Elizabeth Cady Stanton addressed the pioneering Seneca Falls congress on women's rights in 1848, she knew that the stereotype of women in trousers would be used to mock and diminish her words. She had supported the campaign for uncorseted, comfortable women's clothing, but did not want to adopt masculine styles: 'As to their costume the gentlemen need feel no fear of our imitating that for we regard it in violation of every principle of beauty, taste and dignity.' She defended the 'loose flowing garments' of rational dress, and could not resist a further satirical comment aimed at men in authority:

all the Bishops, Priests, Judges, Barristers, and Lord Mayors of the first nation of the globe and the Pope of Rome too, when officiating in their highest offices, they all wear the loose flowing robes, thus tacitly acknowledging that the ordinary male attire is neither dignified nor imposing.²⁸

The same accusation was made by Virginia Woolf, who was so amused at the pompous nature of the British male establishment that she published photographs of judges and clerics in wigs, robes and furs in her 1938 polemic *Three Guineas*.

Your clothes in the first place make us gape with astonishment. How many, how splendid, how extremely ornate they are – the clothes worn by the educated man

in his public capacity! Now you dress in violet: a jewelled crucifix swings on your breast; now your shoulders are covered with lace; now furred with ermine . . .²⁹

Woolf linked the elaborations of masculine dress to the pursuit of war, with military uniform as the ultimate example of how men's dress was a dangerous tool of social status, violence and hierarchy. Using the racist optic of civilization and savagery that so pervaded her era, Woolf argued:

To express worth of any kind, whether intellectual or moral, by wearing pieces of metal, or ribbon, coloured hoods or gowns, is a barbarity which deserves the ridicule we bestow upon the rites of savages.³⁰

Not all men, however, sought to maintain the conventional dress codes of masculinity. Some attempted to diversify what men could wear, or subvert the norms, with the poet and radical Edward Carpenter (1844–1929) terming men's shoes 'leather coffins'. Instead, Carpenter, who identified as a 'third sex' individual, adopted sandals that he made himself, modelled on a pair he had been sent from India.

Carpenter produced sandals for his radical friends, but was widely regarded in the early twentieth century as a crank for his dress unorthodoxy. The project of subverting male dress only took on more mainstream prominence during the later twentieth century, as movements including hippies, beatniks, punk, glam rock and women's liberation challenged conventional fashion codes. For some men, this started with the small rebellion of wearing feminist and anti-sexist badges, with slogans such as 'just another man' or 'celibacy is subversive'.

Others went for a fuller transformation: Welsh anti-sexist activist Pete Six attended men's groups in the 1980s wearing a black cape, red clogs and what he termed 'paint-on trousers'. Influenced by punk, he knitted his own pink and red jumpers, shaved the sides of his head and sported a tight, plaited ponytail in an effort to develop an alternative anti-sexist men's fashion culture.³¹ Commentators were not always impressed; a *Guardian* journalist sarcastically noted:

New man stepped out of a traditional stereotype and immediately found himself another. With his pleated trousers, voluminous shirts, Chinese slippers and self-effacing manner, he labours under a most crippling burden; no one really takes him seriously.³²

Nonetheless, the *Guardian* had co-sponsored a photo competition, 'The New Man of 1985', with the company Aramis Menswear. They awarded a prize to John Colvin for his designs of men's dresses, which John had worn as a member of Bristol anti-sexist men's groups in the 1980s.³³

Just as hierarchies of class and race had complicated feminist efforts to reform fashion, so race and ethnicity proved a minefield for anti-sexist men. Colvin, a dancer, had been inspired by the sense of physical wholeness which he perceived amongst African Caribbean and African men. In a later interview he reflected:

I think many of us would accept the stereotype that if we are men of a West Indian or black African cultural background we have a greater awareness of our body movements and a greater fluidity than most men of

Western cultural origin, but I have yet to see this sense of body movement exposed or exploited in the fashion industry.

John's careless 'we' and evocation of non-white men as closer to their bodies was an unfortunate choice of inspiration and highlighted the lack of engagement within the British anti-sexist men's movement with black and Asian men.

In practice, it did not prove easy to reform men's dress. John Colvin was surprised at the level of sexual harassment he received from men, recalling having men put their hands up his skirt. For a man in a skirt, he reflected:

the reality of dressing in the streets is, it's risky. It's a political act every time. You have to feel confident, you have to have your wits about you, you get harassed, you get abused, mainly, I never got abused by a woman, but I got abuse from men.³⁴

Experiments by some anti-sexist men with androgyny or cross-dressing were motivated by their alliance and affiliation with the women's movement. Others wore skirts, dresses and bras because they wanted to express queer or gay sexuality. Still others had feelings of being the wrong gender. The attempts by all these different groups to subvert male dress powerfully demonstrate how hard it has been for both sexes to self-present in ways that contradict gender norms. Men who wore women's clothes or 'alternative' fashions often found this to be unsafe. They rarely acknowledged, however, that women and non-binary people suffered similar forms of harassment on a daily basis, compounded by legal institutions

that refused to prosecute for rape or assault if women dressed 'provocatively' in short skirts.

Hijabistas

Women's clothes have often deliberately provided a refuge from street and workplace abuse through devices of veiling and cloaking the body. These strategies of self-protection have had feminist potential despite often being read as a form of oppression. When the French-Peruvian writer Flora Tristan travelled to Peru in 1833-4, she encountered women in Lima who wore the *saya* and *manto* – garments that veiled their upper bodies and heads. The *manto*, a black cloak, covered the upper body, while the *saya* covered women's heads, mouths and one eye, an arrangement that Tristan described as 'being at once economical, very neat, convenient, and always ready without ever needing the least care'.

Tristan was emphatic that this dress gave women the power and freedom of disguise:

The woman of Lima, whatever her position in life, is always *herself*; never is she subject to constraint. As a young girl, she escapes from the domination of her parents through the freedom given by her costume. When she marries, she does not take her husband's name but keeps her own, and always remains her own mistress.

Peruvian women, Tristan reported, were free to move around the streets of Lima, talk and flirt with men:

These ladies go alone to the theatre, to bull fights, to public meetings, balls, promenades, churches, go visiting, and are



Figure 5.5
Woman wearing *saya* and *manto*, Lima, c. 1860–80

much seen everywhere. If they meet people with whom they want to chat, they speak to them, leave them, and remain free and independent in the midst of the crowd, much more so than the men, whose faces are uncovered.

For all her enthusiasm, Tristan maintained familiar ideas of the hierarchy of civilization that gave Europe precedence over the rest of the world. She believed that Peruvian women were ‘inferior in moral concerns [compared] to European women’: ‘The stage of civilization that these people have attained is still far removed from ours in Europe. In Peru there is no institution for the education of either sex . . .’ Tristan posed women’s freedom in Lima as a kind of moral infancy. She may also have been naïve to think that freedom could be attained through a simple veil. Peru’s legal system did not recognize women as citizens, and society was dominated by socially conservative institutions and large landowners. This was not an environment where women were already liberated, as Peruvian feminist demands of the early twentieth century revealed. The Peruvian feminist activist María Jesus Alvarado Rivera (1878–1971), for example, was jailed in 1924 for her agitation for women’s rights and was subsequently forced into exile. Nonetheless, Tristan’s observations are of interest because of the deep controversies that have long been associated with practices of veiling – frequently understood as a tool of patriarchy. These debates have been particularly prominent in relation to Islamic practices. Indeed, Tristan was alert to the similarity between Peruvian customs and the veil worn in many Muslim countries. She concluded that in Peru: ‘all the women wear it, no matter what their rank; it is

respected and is a part of the country's customs, like the veil of Moslem women in the Orient.³⁵

Tristan's comments echoed those of an earlier traveller, the English aristocratic letter writer Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762). As the wife of the British Ambassador to Turkey, Lady Mary observed the lives of women of the Ottoman Empire. She sought to counter the myths that circulated amongst Europeans concerning the low status of Muslim women, such as the idea that, for Muslims, women did not have souls. She was also a proponent of veiling, both through observations of Muslim women and her own practice. In similar terms to Tristan, Lady Mary regarded the veil as a welcome source of anonymity for women.³⁶ Later campaigns also welcomed the freedoms of Middle Eastern fashions. When Amelia Bloomer celebrated her designs for trousers, she argued that they were 'Moslem' in inspiration. A San Francisco newspaper described an American follower of Bloomer in 1851 as 'magnificently arrayed in a black satin skirt, very short, with flowing red satin trousers, a splendid yellow crape shawl and a silk turban, *a la Turque*'.³⁷

Despite these sympathetic accounts of Islamic dress, the lives of Muslim women have often been characterized by non-Muslim observers as lives of oppression. Across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many Western commentators had seen the harem and the headscarf as symbolic of the need for secular feminist 'rescue'. Muslim women themselves were also sometimes critical of dress codes, though others found Islamic dress to be a source of empowerment. The controversial politics of veiling in Egypt and

other Muslim countries sheds light on why head covering has caused dilemmas for many decades.

Veiling, Nationalism and the Colonial Gaze

The debates over the 'woman question' at the Rasheed Women's Conference in 1799 suggest a long history of interrogating gender in Egypt. This was a process often dominated by wealthy and upper-class women. Egypt witnessed flourishing women's literary and cultural salons in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as those hosted by Princess Nazli Fazil (1853–1913) and the Lebanese Mayy Ziyadah (1886–1941). Their salons offered space for direct intellectual exchanges between women and men about social, political, cultural and gender issues, which were tentatively extended to wider circles. In Cairo in 1914, the Women's Educational Association was formed, offering public lectures for women about women's issues. This was a response to women being prevented from attending the Egyptian University, established in 1908. Moreover, women were entering the public sphere through their involvement in charity organizations, established and run by upper-middle-class women and funded by women of the Egyptian aristocracy. These offered medical services, shelters and orphanages to poor women and children. Although these activities were largely philanthropic rather than directly feminist, they played an important role in expanding women's involvement in public life. They allowed some women a degree of mobility across the gender-restricted lines separating the ostensibly private sphere of the domestic from realms of civic and commercial activity. Although most

of the roles taken up by women seemed related to the domestic sphere of nurturing and caring for others, they also involved breaking out of the confines of the home and engaging with social problems. Elite Egyptian women's active work in social and political issues was reflected in their efforts to include women's rights in the 1923 constitution, after the 1919 revolution had led to Egypt declaring itself an independent state. There was, however, no constitutional guarantee of gender equality until the overthrow of the monarchy in 1952.

The Egyptian activist Huda Sha'arawi (1879–1947) was born into an upper-class family that practised the seclusion and veiling of women; she was married to a cousin at the age of thirteen. Nonetheless, Sha'arawi did not live a life of confinement. She accessed formal education in her own right, wrote and published in French and Arabic, organized girls' education, and regularly lived apart from her husband. Her political activism was rooted in nationalism, and she took a leading role in organizing women in the 1919 anti-British protests that led to semi-independence as the Kingdom of Egypt. In 1922, Sha'arawi's husband died, and she began to reject the seclusion of the *hijab*. Notoriously, with fellow traveller Saiza Nabarawi, she deliberately unveiled her face at Cairo's train station when returning from the meeting of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) in Rome in 1923.

This unveiling was celebrated by Sha'arawi's European contemporaries as an important step forward for Egyptian women, even though most rural and working-class Egyptian women did not wear any kind of veil in the early twentieth century. For Sha'arawi herself, unveiling was a minor issue, and an article published shortly afterwards in the

International Woman Suffrage News did not even mention it. Instead, she foregrounded the organization she had founded in 1923, the Egyptian Feminist Union.³⁸ Sha'arawi brought out the feminist magazines *L'Egyptienne* and *el-Masreyyah* and concentrated her campaigning on reform of family law and women's access to education. She worked closely with international women's organizations such as the IWSA, a powerful network founded in Berlin in 1904 to push for women's suffrage globally. By 1929, the IWSA had affiliated representatives from fifty-one nations. Its regular congresses debated issues of economic, educational, moral and political rights for women, and tried to show how enfranchisement could be linked to wider emancipation for women. Its monthly journal, *Jus Suffragii* (*The Right to Vote*), documented the women's movement across the world, in English and French versions. Through this international network as well as her domestic actions, Huda Sha'arawi became a very high-profile representative of Egyptian feminists. Her prolonged efforts to gain women freedom and rights were documented in her memoir, *Mudhakkirātī* (*My Memoir*). In contrast, when translated into English, the book was given the orientaling title *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist*. It was still hard for Anglophone audiences to imagine women in Muslim countries without recourse to images of seclusion and veiling, despite Sha'arawi's extensive and public feminist activism. Mocking the Western obsession with the veil, Sha'arawi herself described 'the veil of ignorance' which obscured Western women's views on Egyptian women.

Veiling may not have been Sha'arawi's main target, but it remained an important concern for many Muslim women.

Nazira Zain al-Din (1908–76) was born into an intellectual Lebanese family and educated in both Muslim and Catholic settings. She spoke out against the veiling practices called for by some Islamic authorities in the 1920s, while she was still in her teens. Her 1928 book, *Veiling and Unveiling*, challenged Syrian clerics who were arguing for what Zain al-Din termed ‘the black all-enveloping cloth and the face veil’. She linked dress restrictions to other physical constraints Muslim women faced, arguing that Islamic clerics ‘wanted the veils to be the walls of the boudoirs, to be left only for the grave’. In her interpretation, Islamic scripture was perfectly compatible with women’s freedoms. It was premised on ideas of natural freedom of will and thought, possessed by both men and women; she found no mention of facial covering in the Qur’an. Zain al-Din argued for the enhanced role for mothers in Islam, and highlighted the Qur’an’s defence of women’s property rights, rights to divorce, and forbidding of female infanticide. Like many other feminist polemics of her time and earlier, *Veiling and Unveiling* positioned women as innately possessed of reason, and blamed women’s failings on their lack of access to education. And like many nationalists of her period, Zain al-Din regarded nations that confined women as necessarily weakened in the struggle to compete with other nations and secure independence.

In the colonial settings that nurtured the activism of women such as Zain al-Din and Sha’arawi, it was hard to find a way of advocating women’s freedoms without posing the problem in colonial terms, as a question of the ‘primitive backwardness’ of the colonized. Feminism seemed to be invested in modernizing the nation on Western terms. Zain al-Din’s

opponents accused her of having allowed missionaries to dictate the contents of her book. Though she published a refutation of such criticism in 1929, titled *The Girl and the Shaikhs*, she did not publish further.

The veil remains a complex symbol. For some women, it was a cultural and spiritual practice that was compatible with women’s public organizing – indeed, it was embraced as a practice that enabled such organizing. Egyptians such as the well-educated Zainab al-Ghazali (1917–2005) organized Egyptian women under the banner of radical Islam and social justice. Al-Ghazali had been a member of Sha’arawi’s Egyptian Feminist Union. Motivated by her sense of the strong family rights granted to women by Islam, she created the Muslim Women’s Society in the 1930s, later transformed into the Muslim Sisters.³⁹ Her organizations campaigned for recognition of the spiritual equality of the sexes within Islam, though she was also committed to precepts on women’s obedience to men. This did not prevent her from lecturing to mass audiences and publishing widely. Al-Ghazali was to spend long periods in jail as a result of her activism, which unsettled the secular-nationalist Egyptian authorities both for its Islamic content and its feminism.

Under Gamal Abdel Nasser’s constitution of 1956, Egyptian women were enfranchised and guaranteed equality. Their status became part of Nasser’s Pan-Arabist secular modernization project in a shift to ‘state feminism’ underpinned by ideas of ‘national uplift’. The veil was discouraged in this version of nationalist modernity, and women’s participation in waged labour was prioritized as a key route to nation-building.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, there was no consensus in Egyptian

society as to what role faith would play in women's lives, and by the 1970s a resurgent Islamic movement began to promote what was termed an 'authentic' rather than 'Westernized' Islam. Larger numbers of Egyptian women embraced the *hijab* in the 1970s and 80s, particularly younger women on university campuses. Similar trends were witnessed in Indonesia, where versions of the fitted headscarf, the *jilbab* were adopted by women, spurred by the rise of Islamic student activism that contested the secularist, militarized 'New Order' regime of President Suharto that ruled Indonesia from 1966 to 1998.⁴¹ A proliferation of 'modest' Islamic fashion, termed *busana Muslimah*, replaced prior commitments to austere piety. Local styles developed in dialogue with the latest look in Cairo or Jeddah. Wearing the flowing trousers, tunics and changing forms of head-covering that make up *busana Muslimah* could express both nationalist and religious sentiments through the cultivation of pious fashion.⁴²

In Iran, there was a similar backlash against the forbidding of women's head-coverings in 1936 by the brutal Western-backed dictator Reza Shah Pahlavi. Wearing a headscarf could be a means for Iranian women to indicate their support for the revolution of 1979 and to demand the right to choose their 'look' in a new articulation of 'Islamic modernity'. It quickly became apparent, however, that the Islamic revolutionary authorities in Iran were opposed to women's presence in public life and used the imposition of the veil to violently impose gender segregation and remove women from public life. In Pakistan, similar coercive Islamicization measures under the military regime of General Zia saw deep challenges to the legal rights of women to work and inhabit public space after

1977. In 1987, a group of women within the Pakistani Women's Action Forum had become incensed by the state's distribution of *chadors* (scarves) and *dupattas* (shawls). They had been active since 1981 in campaigns to uphold women's rights under family law, particularly to contest the arrests and detentions under charges of *zina* (adultery), widely exploited by relatives to control women's behaviour. One of their members, Lala Rukh, recalled how fond she was of wearing the 'beautiful' *chador*, but she refused to be forced to wear it. The group set their head-coverings on fire as a protest against a regime that brutally enforced a hostile legal and cultural environment for Pakistani women.⁴³ 1987 also saw the assassination in Pakistan of the founder of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, Meena Keshwar Kamal (1956–87). RAWA members had been working since 1977 on women's literacy and employment projects in Kabul, and campaigning against domestic violence. RAWA had found the whole-body covering of the *burqa* a useful means of smuggling cameras and their mimeographed journal *Payam-e-Zan* (*Women's Message*) in the dangerous, unstable Afghan environment. Their anti-fundamentalist, pro-democracy feminist politics set them against both Soviet occupiers and jihadi resisters, at a deadly cost. Meena's exile in Pakistan had done little to protect her from what was probably state-sponsored assassination.⁴⁴

While some Islamists were actively opposed to feminism, labelling it a mark of the corruption of 'the West', others echoed al-Ghazali in basing their feminism on the Qur'an, as well as within their everyday experiences of empowerment through Islamic institutions.⁴⁵ Like all major world religions,



Figure 5.6
Afghan feminist Meena Keshwar Kamal speaking in 1982

Islam sustains a range of interpretations in different locations and historical moments. In Iran's Islamic Republic, despite the rhetoric and legal reforms aiming to confine and veil women after the 1979 revolution, there has been an increasing presence of women in public and cultural life. Ziba Mir-Hosseini has argued that wearing a veil has allowed Iranian women to enter a wider variety of areas in public life. She points to the gradual dismantling of bans, undertaken in the early days of the revolution, on women serving as judges and studying subjects such as engineering. Instead, there has been a reinterpretation of sharia law in the 1990s to encompass feminist principles of women's autonomy, protection from violence and access to the public sphere.⁴⁶ From the 1980s, designers and manufacturers began to offer fashionable versions of women's Islamic dress, embraced by some women as an attractive 'look' and marking the rise of Islam as a more powerful political and cultural force.

'Liberating women' has continued to be a widely stated motive for Islamophobic actions, such as the banning of veils and the harassment of veiled women in public places over the past decade in France, Holland, Belgium, Austria, Denmark and New Zealand. The symbolic and actual violence of these bans was demonstrated on French beaches in 2015, when armed police were called to enforce the municipal ban on the 'burkini', a body-covering swimsuit adopted by some Muslim women. Heavy-handed police interventions that led to Muslim women on beaches being forced to remove their modest clothes did not sit comfortably with claims of feminist motivation for the ban. The controversial upholding of the ban on face coverings in France despite the mandatory wearing

of facemasks during the 2020 Covid-19 crisis has also illustrated the punitive discrimination faced by Muslim women.

The veil continues to be a rallying point for those determined to align Islamophobia with feminism, drawing power from what bell hooks identified as ‘the imperial gaze – the look that seeks to dominate, subjugate, and colonize’.⁴⁷ Despite long-standing claims that religion is necessarily patriarchal, feminism has never been a uniquely secular movement when viewed in global perspective, and religious motivations have a long history of sparking feminist activism.

Islamic feminism has a long heritage, with strong support for women’s rights and education developing amongst Muslims in the Middle East, South and South-East Asia in the late nineteenth century. To understand Muslim women in headscarves or veils as necessarily impelled by male subjection, as so many critics have done, ignores their own sense of choice and complex reasons for covering their heads. It ascribes a monolithic patriarchal stance to Islam in ways that past commentators would not have recognized. Indeed, for many campaigners of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was not Islam but other religious traditions that mistreated women, with particularly strong feelings against the practices of Hindus, Sikhs and Roman Catholics. At other moments, it has not been religions but nations that have been generalized as anti-feminist. In 1917, as the United States entered the First World War against Germany, the *New York Times* published a headline claiming ‘Germany Hates Feminism’. The editors presented the United States, in contrast, as ‘the land of feminism, the land of privileged womanhood’.⁴⁸ There has been

enormous historical variability in which religions or nations might be depicted as feminist or anti-feminist, and no such claims can be taken at face value. But the growing momentum behind the Western portrayal since the late 1970s of Islam as, in its essence, fundamentalist and anti-feminist makes it important to foreground the historical presence of Islamic feminism, and the variable ways in which headscarves and veils have been claimed and rejected by Muslim women.

Across the globe, women have had to tread carefully in choosing and challenging how they look. Suffrage activists trod a fine line between enjoying the ‘freedom suits’ advocated by American dress reformers from the 1840s and staying within conventional boundaries of self-presentation in order to amplify their voices. The suffrage orator Susan B. Anthony noted that when she wore shortened skirts, ‘The attention of my audience was fixed upon my clothes instead of my words.’⁴⁹ She opted to wear long skirts, despite their dragging constraint on her movements. Dress reform remained popular amongst radical women, but for those nearer to conventional seats of power, it proved distracting and risky.

The experiences of Hillary Clinton in the presidential contest of 2016 remind us that women’s dress continues to gain unwelcome attention in the twenty-first century. Clinton appropriated ‘pant suits’, arguing that ‘they make me feel professional and ready to go.’ She was also keen to adopt a ‘uniform’ look that would discourage reporters from being distracted from the content of her speeches and rule out the darker practice of ‘up-skirting’. Nonetheless, the coverage Clinton received was relentlessly critical of her clothing choices, whether for looking too male or spending too freely on herself.

Despite the hostile environment faced by women in public life, it has still proved possible for women to make their voices heard, sometimes in highly unlikely surroundings. Women's liberation activists had largely written off beauty contestants as victims of patriarchy, portraying them as sheep or cows. But in November 2017, models competing for the Miss Peru contest approached the microphone in glittering gold dresses. One by one, they announced their names and regions, and their 'statistics'. Replacing the usual bust and waist size, each one announced a headline figure – the number of femicides, assaults on children, and rates of domestic violence in their regions and cities. The protest was inspired by the wider hashtag-led protest #NiUnaMenos (Not One Less), which has highlighted the epidemic of domestic violence and killings suffered by Latin American women and has led to huge protest marches. The juxtaposition of young women's bodies seemingly tailored to the male gaze in the beauty contest setting and the gruesome lists of assaults was controversial. For some activists, it was an unacceptable coupling of feminism with the commercialized and corporate world of beauty contests. But it is the very juxtaposition, and the voices of the often mute or disregarded models, that give this action force. It provides a striking reminder that feminism can adopt many different platforms and voices, and a 'feminist look' can span the beauty contest tiara, the headscarf and the 'freedom suit'.

Feelings

Emotions have long been part of the warp and weft of attempts to rethink the gender order and convey the urgency of feminisms. When I first encountered a book published by the feminist publishing house Virago, with its recognizable green spine, I was probably around fifteen. It was Miles (Stella) Franklin's *My Brilliant Career*, an account of an Australian rebel who defied conventions and drudgery to insist on her right to write. Published in 1901, under a male pseudonym, the author herself was only sixteen. Her refusal of the path of heterosexual romance spoke powerfully to my own emotions across the thousands of miles and many decades that separated us. A couple of years later, I was equally gripped by Simone de Beauvoir's *The Mandarins*, written in the 1950s, which charted her tense, awkward love affair spanning Chicago and Paris. Found by chance in a library in Southern Africa, the book transported me emotionally into a world of intensely serious scrutiny of relations between the sexes. These were the texts that helped me, as a teenager, forge an emotional connection to feminism, even if, when one of my teachers asked me if I was a 'bra burner', I had no idea what he meant.

Looking back historically, it is characteristic of feminist