

"Our Weapon is Our Nakedness"

Public nudity as a method to bring about social change

Laura Burton

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Legend holds that in the early eleventh century Lady Godiva was unhappy with her husband's treatment of peasants. The Lady wanted her husband to lower taxes and increase appreciation of the arts and music, actions that were not common in the time period, and her tendency to demand political change was considered highly unorthodox. Nevertheless, she was determined, and told him that she would ride naked through the streets of the city if he complied with her requests. Her husband agreed, and Lady Godiva became the first known individual to use public nudity for political gain.

Today, women removing their clothes in order to improve their conditions are a clear and present force. The use of nudity as a form of protest is an ancient method of obtaining political power that has gained significant popularity in recent years. Although the method is used more frequently in industrialized nations, its ancient roots and true power is typically in underdeveloped nations, where traditional ideas about women still abound. In a world where the "haves" and the "have-nots" are becoming increasingly distant from each other, a study of nude protests provides an interesting lens through which to view different cultures and economic systems.

In order to best analyze the different uses of nude protesting we will look at two case studies. The first study will look at the use of nudity to bring about social change in the impoverished nation of Nigeria. The second will analyze the "Baring Witness" project intended to protest the United States led war in Iraq.

I. "Our Weapon is our Nakedness"

Last July in Nigeria, a group of over 600 women shocked the world with their nonviolent takeover of a ChevronTexaco oil terminal and subsequent message: give in

to our demands, or we will remove our clothes. For ten days, the attention of the world's media was completely captured by a group of women who had, for the most part, never seen a television, nor read a paper. Over the next several months, other groups of women all over Nigeria began their own peaceful takeovers of ChevronTexaco oil refineries, and protests of other companies. The ability of the women to get the attention of ChevronTexaco, their government, and the world obviously warrants analysis. Throughout the history of social movements, the toughest battles have often been those fought by individuals with little or no political voice. In order to better understand such conflicts, we must first understand the impetus and the dynamics of the women's oil protests and second, evaluate the success of the movement.

Initially, it is important to understand the reasons for the movement. Nigeria was once one of the bright spots of the African continent. Farming sustained the strong economy, with agriculture constituting more than 60 percent of the gross domestic product and 75 percent of export earnings (Buckley 1996). However, the arrival of an oil boom in the 1970s prompted the government to focus the economy upon petroleum resources and largely ignore the farming subsidies that had made Nigeria stable. When the oil market collapsed, the government continued its reliance on petroleum, with devastating effects. Nigerian agriculture has plummeted, now making up only 30% of Nigeria's gross domestic product with food importation massively rising (Buckley 1996). Corrupt officials in the government get most of the profits from the remaining oil market and hoard supplies like fertilizer and insecticide necessary for farmers. Adding to the farmer's burden is the environmental damage wrought by the oil companies that has

made land use and fishing incredibly difficult. Although oil workers live comfortably, the vast majority of the population has fallen into extreme poverty.

Numerous protests of the conditions have materialized over the past several decades. Mostly, these protests have been led exclusively by men using violent guerrilla tactics to force negotiations. Techniques like siphoning oil from pipelines and violent kidnappings of ChevronTexaco employees had become common in the region (Doran 2002). These techniques have offered temporary gains, but long-term benefits have not resulted from such methods. Generally, the oil companies pay ransom and fix pipelines with the understanding that such expenditures are simply the cost of doing business in an impoverished region. The Nigerian government has responded to such attacks with a great deal of force. In 1995, the government drew international criticism for the execution of political activist and writer Ken Saro-Wiwa. Protests that interfere with oil supplies are often dealt with very harshly.

In addition to economic oppression, women in Nigeria are in a particularly powerless position. Traditional attitudes about women and rampant violence threaten women's very survival in the region. Ten states have adopted strict Islamic sharia laws that severely penalize women for crimes such as adultery and premarital sex. The nation drew international outrage last year when Amina Lawal was sentenced to death by stoning for adultery. Although her conviction was recently overturned, female activists in Nigeria continue to face barriers to gender equality. Last summer, the Miss World Beauty Pageant, scheduled in Nigeria, sparked massive riots between Muslims and Christians that left over 100 people dead and 500 injured (100 Dead 2002).

Strong cultural objection to the female body that sparked the Miss World riots has existed for centuries. In modern Nigeria, a woman keeps most of her body covered as a way to honor male relatives. A woman removing her clothes is said to bring about the "curse of nakedness." In traditional African cultures, a woman removing her clothes in an act of protest is the single most potent statement she can make. The gesture is interpreted as the basest form of begging, and shames the individuals whom the protest is directed towards (Rosen, 2002). This fascinating custom stems from the idea that women's bodies are sacred, and to remain covered; a woman shaming herself in public to such a degree is indicative of true desperation. The act shows that the men in the woman's life, who are supposed to be taking care of her well being, are failing. The protest is essentially an attack upon the masculinity of her husband, brothers, or sons, which is a statement not taken lightly in traditional cultures.

In this culture of oppression, the women of Nigeria had every reason to believe themselves powerless. Without economic and social power, women had no means by which to make their voices heard. The only tool at the Nigerian woman's disposal was her desire to improve conditions, and the use of her own body.

The women's protest movement began in mid-July with the takeover of the ChevronTexaco oil station in Escravos, Nigeria. Nearly 600 women, aged 30 to 70, marched from their villages to occupy the plant, which contained 700 hundred employees (Branigan 2002). The women threatened to remove their clothing, in a traditional shaming gesture, if the company did not negotiate; ChevronTexaco quickly offered to talk with the women's leaders. After a few days of negotiations, the women released 200 employees as a sign of goodwill. As production ground to a halt,

ChevronTexaco agreed to sign an agreement promising employment opportunities for local residents, as well as improvement of sanitation, schools, and environmental practices. The women had held the plant nonviolently for ten days, cooking for their hostages while negotiating for better conditions back home.

The success of the women in Escravos soon led to other takeovers throughout the region. Most importantly, on August 8, 2002, women from the city of Warri forced the shutdowns of the local headquarters of ChevronTexaco and Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC). The Warri women marched to the building early in the morning, clanging pots and pans to announce their arrival and demonstrated for nearly 15 hours. The Africa News questioned Elizabeth Ebido, an Itsekiri woman, in regards to her reasons for leaving her home to protest, she responded:

"We are all women here. We are angry and grieved that is why we have come together. We cannot really on our husbands anymore for this fight because they are not giving us the desired results. More over, these days, you know that it is the women that take up most of the responsibilities...My only occupation is fishing. But nowadays, when I go to the ravine areas...Oil pollution and gas flaring has killed all the fishes. The farmers who farm the land cannot get any thing from their land anymore because of environmental degradation...we are hungry. Our children are suffering... Three days ago, I lost my sister... They do not give our women employment, we are jobless and have no money because our means of livelihood has been destroyed. We are hungry that's why we came here." (Nigeria 2002).

ChevronTexaco again negotiated with the women's leaders at Warri, but SPDC chose different methods. Soldiers were called in at the Shell protest to quell the women. Although many different accounts of the events exist, numerous protesters witnessed brutality from the soldiers towards the woman, including a violent beating of one woman and the gruesome removal of a breast from another (Nigeria, 2002).

Eventually concessions were made from both companies. Less successfully, in Ewan,

Nigeria, women voluntarily ended a nine-day oil refinery occupation without any negotiations from ChevronTexaco (Protesters, 2002).

All of the protests had a few key factors in common. First, the protestors were all women, and the threat of removing clothing was always an important force. Secondly, the occupations and pickets were all entirely nonviolent. Third, the movement had grassroots origins, and lastly, the women operated with the expectation that their protests would lead to actual change. All three factors made the women's protests unique and highly effective.

Initially, the fact that the protesters were exclusively women was very important to the success of the movements. Women in the third world are often viewed as the ultimate victims, oppressed by their governments, their poverty, and their husbands. For the purposes of drawing the attention of the international community, women were clearly the best source of protesters. The oil industry themselves demonstrated their fear of female protesters in an Oil Daily article (2002) describing the Ewan occupation. Interestingly, the article describes most details of the occupation, but conspicuously leaves out the fact that all of the "militant protestors" mentioned in the article are women. It seems unlikely that such a detail would be deemed unnecessary. Clearly, even the oil companies recognize the potential impact that the women could have. The influence of the women was additionally noted in the rhetoric used by the male and female locals not participating in the protests, who referred to the women occupying the Escravos terminal as "the mamas" (Branigan 2002).

In addition, the threat to remove clothing was a potent source of power. The female protestors knew well the impact that the gesture could have. One of the

women's leaders, Helen Odeworitse, told the Associated Press "our weapon is our nakedness" (Rosen 2002). Although ChevronTexaco and Shell are international companies, they both quickly recognized the destabilizing effect the curse of nakedness would have upon their business and ability to keep employees in Nigeria.

The second primary factor influencing the success of the movement was its faith in nonviolence. Often, women are found at the centers of nonviolent social movements. Most cultures still teach women to be passive, yet criticize the women when they attempt to bring these teachings into the political sphere. The women used only nonviolent occupations to accomplish their goals. The commitment to nonviolence was a true effort on the part of the women, many of whom were from rival tribes with histories of warfare. The Ijaw and Itsekiri tribes have traditionally been in opposition to one another, and have recently had bloody clashes in numerous Nigerian cities (Nigeria 2002). However, women from both tribes united to take over the Escravos plant in a display of unity unprecedented in nearly a century.

Many in the western world found the idea of protesters cooking delicious food for their hostages, or releasing hostages who needed to get back to their families, incredible. Indeed, the women's protests are a welcome contrast from the militant "youth groups" of past oil company protests in Nigeria. Formerly, it was easy for the Nigerian government and the oil companies to deny requests of the locals by claiming the villagers were resorting to terrorist and guerrilla tactics. In contrast, denying the requests of a group of tribal women armed with pots and pans is a difficult task (Powerful, 2002).

The grassroots nature of the movement was the most appropriate method to formulate a protest to the oil companies in Nigeria. It seems that the presence of the companies is, at its nature, a grassroots problem. When the protests began, the government feared that a highly organized group of women were leading a conspiracy designed to shut down oil production across the River Delta. However, they quickly realized that the first protest had an influence on surrounding villagers, leading to a ripple effect all over the region (Delta 2002). The government desire to blame the problems on an organized group of militants because impossible.

The grassroots nature of the movement also contributed to the international support the women had. Many were inclined to label the group as radical militants. However, the images of neighborhood women leaving their homes with small packs and bowls to go takeover an oil plant defied stereotypes of radicals and helped the women keep their moderate status. These perceptions also allowed the movement to grow and take in women who were not formerly involved in the protest movement. Women within their villages talking to other women is likely what started the ripple effect of protests throughout the River Delta. The activity was often just as social as it was political. Mothers and daughters joined together, and women joined together to discuss problems of all kinds. The bond that the women formed during the protests will likely serve as an important motivating factor for future efforts.

Lastly, and most important when analyzing the effectiveness of the movement, is the goals of the takeovers. The most effective social movements must have clear goals, which can be met by the movement, as well as more abstract ideals to strive for. Some of the least successful social movements have lacked one of these components.

The recent WTO protests in Seattle resorted to violence mostly because the protesters were not really expecting to gain change by their protests, so they had nothing to lose by resorting to violence and other ineffective means of persuasion. Only the abolishment of the entire World Trade Organization or a sweeping change of leadership really would have pleased the protesters, and the WTO would never agree to such demands. The oil companies in Nigeria, on the other hand, were likely to agree to the more moderate demands of the women villagers. A successful social movement also needs more abstract goals, like an end in the poverty that characterizes the River Delta, to keep supporters after the primary goals have been met, and to serve as a guidepost during a continuing progression towards a better situation.

The future of the women's movement against the oil companies is somewhat unclear. National oil recently announced plans to build four new oil and gas plants across Nigeria in the coming years. (Ehigiator 2002). The Nigerian government continues to drag its feet on more equitable sharing of oil wealth. In an effort to appease the women and stop protest, "leaders" of the movement were brought in to speak with leading government officials. However, these women were mostly well-to-do wives of government officials who had very little if any involvement in the actual protests (Warri, 2002). Most importantly, the United States has been mute on the demands of the women. Nigeria. As the United State's fifth largest supplier of oil, the impoverished nation is a strategic interest (Rosen 2002). International pressure for the Nigerian government to compromise will be limited as long as the United States values its oil supply over the lives of tribal people in Nigeria. However, there can be no doubt that the women have opened to doors for change.

The ability of these women to act under their current situation requires a courage that most Americans cannot begin to imagine. Africa news (Nigeria 2002) related a particularly moving story from the protests. A guard at the Warri protest beat a 60-year-old woman into a coma because he felt "insulted" by the woman. The woman's daughter heard of her mother's condition and came quickly to the protest site. Upon arrival, she inquired as to the identity of the culprit, who the other protesters identified.

"As the young women approached the gate, Ahmed ordered her to move back if she does not want what happened to her mother to happen to her. The young lady said she was ready to be killed even as Ahmed tried to kill her mother. Then the unexpected happened. The young lady stepped to a corner, removed her blouse, undid the strap with which she tied her wrapper, removed her wrapper, and half-nude with only her bra and under wear on, she made for soldier Ahmed, daring him to do his worse (Nigeria 2002)."

The soldier stood rooted to the spot, unable to move towards the woman. A superior officer eventually came forwards to take the woman's mother to the hospital.

The ability of the Nigerian women to join together and change their world is nothing short of amazing. Other social movements can certainly learn from the very things that made the Nigerian movement successful: unique protesters, non-violence, grassroots efforts, and clear goals with a willingness to negotiate. The even the strict traditional culture of Nigeria was used for the women's benefit. The very attitudes that hold them out of the workplace and in inferior positions to men also gave them incredible power to persuade.

II. "I saw women's bodies forming letters - and the word they formed had to be PEACE." (Sheehan 2003)

November 12, 2003 was an unseasonably cool and rainy day in southern California, hardly the sort of day that would make a person want to lie down naked in a field for nearly an hour. Nevertheless, several people from a local activist group calling themselves "Unreasonable Women" showed up to bare all in the rain in the name of peace and justice. The women arranged themselves in such a way that their nude bodies spelled out the word "peace", photographed the display and sent the picture to media outlets across the country (Bell 2003).

Word of the event quickly spread, and before long, hundreds of similar events were organized. Naked men and women stripped for peace in dozens of states, including Montana, Alaska and Texas. The idea caught on internationally and projects were organized in Japan, South Africa, Antarctica and many more cities around the globe. In an effort to understand these protests, we will first analyze the motivating factors for the protests as well as their dynamics. Secondly, we will look into the effectiveness and persuasive appeal of the Baring Witness project.

Anti-war activists have been a political force in the United States since WWI. After reaching a peak during Vietnam, the movement became fragmented, focusing diverse issues including nuclear buildup and the US government's involvement in Central and South American politics. In the past decade, no issues have been able to unite and revive the anti-war movement. Indeed, Seattle's Peace and Justice Alliance, a 20-year-old nonprofit organization, was forced to suspend activities recently due to financial difficulties (Tu 2002).

The September 11 attacks upon the World Trade Center and Pentagon began a series of events that would ignite the anti-war community and unify the fragmented

causes on a scale not seen since the Vietnam War. The subsequent US-led war against Afghanistan led to moderate resistance, but when discussion began of a war with Iraq, peace advocates began speak out.

Within weeks, mainstream media sources in the United States began to report anti-war demonstrations. Although the public was evenly divided on the issue, the activist community had mobilized into a force to be reckoned with (). Generally, the goals of the demonstrations were to gain the attention of the media, and subsequently, the sympathy of the public. However, the protesters were frequently disappointed that the media tended to focus on the more violent and extreme elements of the movement. The public was increasingly becoming convinced that the anti-war demonstrations represented extremist elements of the movement and generally, they gained few sympathizers outside of the activist community.

Key players in the movement recognized the need to show their demonstrations were nonviolent and peaceful. When the women in California posed nude for peace, organizers quickly recognized the opportunity to document completely nonviolent acts of dissent whole showcasing the large amount of people standing up in opposition to the war. Several events were organized in California before the protests spread to other parts of the country. The events did not always use nudity, but the vast majority used nude, female bodies to spell out the word "peace" in English or other languages, peace signs, or the words "no Bush".

One major purpose of the events was to draw in media attention, but the American mainstream media showed a fundamental misunderstanding of the purpose of the movement. Although the media covered the demonstrations, the organizers

became frustrated often when major media outlets missed the point of their protest.

After the first Baring Witness event in California, the CBS Sunday Morning program did a story on the demonstration in which Charles Osgood observed: "talk about a body of work" and another reporter commented: "I was hoping for a close up" (Sheehan 2003).

There was an essential communication barrier between the message the demonstrators were sending and the message the media and the public were receiving. The media was unable to separate the sexuality of the women in the photographs from their nudity, and as such, the demonstrations became a chance to further objectify the female body as opposed to an opportunity to view female nudity at the protesters intended.

The organizers had fundamentally different ideas about their use of the female body, as Donna Sheehan (2003), one of the original organizers articulated:

"It is no accident either that women would choose to get naked for the sake of peace and justice. For Baring Witness is about using the greatest weapon women have, the power of the feminine, the power of our beauty and nakedness to awaken our male leaders and stop them in their tracks. In this way Baring Witness is about heightening the awareness of human vulnerability.

By risking with our nakedness - our charm and beauty and vulnerability - in service of peace we are exposing the flesh all humans share. We are casting off the old dominant paradigm of aggression and restoring the power of the feminine to its rightful place as the protector of life. It is time for women to deter the men in their lives from violent acts, as nurturers, as guardians of our families and as voices of reason." (Sheehan 2003)

For Sheehan and the rest of the participants, their nudity was about restoring feminine power and the concepts of peace and justice that they felt the male world was ignoring. The media's interpretation of the women as sex symbols degraded their purpose.

The resistance the public has traditionally shown towards those who reject social norms further affected the effectiveness of the movement. The communication gap between the demonstrators and the public left many confused as to how the demonstrations were at all linked to the war. As one writer in Australia contended:

"Peace is always worth promoting, but giggling on a hillside in your birthday suit is an inane way to go about it... The Australian public knows war is imminent, thank you. It's ridiculous to suggest that we'll change our opinion on Iraq after seeing 1000 nude women forming letters on a hillside, like some soft porn Sesame Street sketch.... Men and women of the peace movement, if you want to stop this war, put your clothes back on and start marching. Start talking. Start raising hell. Start acting like your point is serious enough to make with your clothes on." (Ferguson 2003)

There were certainly many ways in which the women's nudity could have been used to clearly show opposition to the war. One reporter suggested that the immorality of public nudity was vastly outweighed by the immorality of the war (Bell 2003). The act of lying on the ground, naked and vulnerable, could have been representative of civilian populations who inevitably suffer the most in military interactions. The message could be the same as the Nigerian women: that only an act of desperation could persuade leaders to vote against the war. Although all of these interpretations can be drawn from the photographs, the organizers never made a clear, concise message available to the public. In the modern media world of sound bites and condensed messages, the Bearing Witness photographs became a statement without meaning.

Without a solid way to link nudity with anti-war arguments the demonstrations had little hope for persuading the public. This is not to say that Bearing Witness was a failure, for it did put a peaceful face on the anti-war movement, but the major goal of the project was to persuade the public and, in turn, the government. Without well-

developed communication between the demonstrators and the media the groundswell of public support needed to prevent the war did not emerge.

What was the pivotal factor that made the Nigerian women's nudity so much more powerful than the women protesting the war? A variety of cultural factors, including women's oppression, the role of the media, and the goals of the women contributed to the outcomes of their respective efforts.

The image of women prevalent in both cultures certainly had an impact upon the influence of nudity. In pre-sexual revolution Nigeria, the media and public separated the women's naked bodies from their sexual prowess, while in the nations where Bearing Witness took place, female nudity is automatically associated with pornography and sexuality. The lack of communication that became a hindrance for Bearing Witness can partially be blamed upon these interpretations of the female body.

The media had vastly different interpretations of the two events, with the African media being largely sympathetic and western media labeling the women as sex objects. Interestingly, the coverage of the Nigerian protests in the United States was similar to the coverage of the Bearing Witness protests, with women largely labeled as sexual objects rather than recognition of the women's plight and their reasons for using nudity.

Despite their differences, the two protest movements were remarkably similar in many ways. Initially, the idea for Bearing Witness stemmed from the Nigerian protests. Organizer Deborah Sheehan had heard about the demonstrations in Nigeria and decided to use female nudity to protest the war in Iraq. (Sheehan 2003)

The clearest similarity between the two actions was obviously the use of nudity, both to gain public attention and, in the case of the Nigerian women, force compromise. Objectified for centuries, it seems odd that the female body still holds the ability to disturb society, but public nudity in modern cultures represents a unique statement. Dr. Paul Rapoport noted:

"Public nudity, especially if unexpected, preempts our attention and demands we cope with a strong distraction and strong emotions. We're placed in a position of confronting what is normally suppressed and repressed. Instinctual interest goes against cultural taboo and leaves us fascinated yet unsettled, until, perhaps, shame inhibits us further. Soon to follow are fear or disgust plus notions of disorder or violation." (Rapoport 2000)

The act of public nudity, especially by women whose bodies have been objectified and reduced to sexual tools by western culture, is a statement of vulnerability not unlike the revered curse of nakedness in Nigeria. By removing their clothing the women of Nigeria were stating that the men ruling their government and lives were running them both poorly, to the point that they had to take things into their own hands. Paul Reffell, an organizer for Bearing Witness, explained the movement by saying:

"It is woman's role to give life, to nurture and protect their men and their children. When men are at war, either between themselves or with Nature, they are unhealthy, unhappy and in danger. That is the time for women to step in. That is when it is time to shock men, stop them in their tracks, turn them into embarrassed schoolboys, remind them of how they all came into this world and make them listen to words of consolation, healing and peace." (Sheehan 2003)

These statements sound remarkably like the words of the women marching to protest ChevronTexaco, and the messages the two movements attempted to send become remarkably similar when we consider their goals and interactions with society.

Regardless of the culture in which it is used, public nudity, especially from women, will draw the attention of the media and the public. However, successful

movements must clearly communicate the connection between the nudity and their message. The women of Nigeria intended to show a willingness to go as far as necessary to change their conditions. Their ability to empower themselves through oppression should be analyzed by leaders of social movements in the United States and other nations involved in the Bearing Witness project. Those who would use nudity to bring about political change can learn valuable lessons from both cases.

Lady Godiva succeeded in changing the conditions of the peasants in her area by using nothing but her intelligence and her naked body. In a world where political influence is increasingly bought and sold, it is important to study and take note of a protest method that reduces humans to their most natural state.

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