

Women Activists' Fashion Choices and Their Factors of Influence

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“Our garments are archives of memories.” Dr. Tanisha Ford says this in her 2020 podcast episode “Dressed in Dreams: A Black Girl’s Love Letter to Fashion.” This phrase explains to us just how much meaning a garment can hold, whether it’s memories of good times or a symbol of protest within an organization. Every garment choice has some sort of external factor influencing the wearer’s choices, whether it has to do with society, art, or even politics. Women activists chose to wear specific clothing to protests to make their viewpoint clear. Wearing items such as miniskirts and stilettos, black berets, or even wearing their hair a certain way all made a statement, and most of those statements were in some way political. Those statements made with their clothing were showing their oppressors that they were desperate for change, and that they were willing to do whatever it took to get to drive those changes.

Women’s rights activists were fighting for freedom, but they were fighting for individuality too. Feminine items were popular to wear to protests and were shunned by many. Dr. Tanisha Ford mentions in her podcast that college age women would wear hot pants and stilettos to protests since they were seen as unrespectable and sexual (Calahan & Zachary, 2020). The hot pants were extremely short shorts that created a very sexual image, and the stilettos only added to this. However, the stilettos did serve a purpose to the protesters since they could be taken off and used as weapons against the police that came to brutalize them (Calahan & Zachary, 2020). Women at the time found that being respectively clad did not protect them and fought back because of it. Instead of letting the world tell them what to do or wear they decided to push back and become stronger and more feminine, and the rest of the world was not okay with that. Another feminine clothing item that was looked down on was the miniskirt. South African women would wear them, and their communities would shun them because of the sexual

politics behind the clothes (Calahan & Zachary, 2020). These women could be beaten and jailed in certain cultures, and so they were used throughout protests after that in order to support and defend those women who wanted to wear the miniskirts simply because it made them feel more feminine and pretty. Moore's (2020) journal stated the following:

In 2014, Uganda was experiencing a sex panic of massive proportions. That February, President Yoweri Museveni enacted the Anti-Homosexuality and Anti-Pornography Bills, dubbed by the media as the “anti-gay” and “miniskirt” bills, respectively. Designed to criminalize the expression of non-normative, non-marital sexuality, the bills targeted gays lesbians, and the wearers of miniskirts – urban young women. (p. 322)

The miniskirt became a staple for protests after this event for obvious reasons. The women were fighting for their right to control their own sexuality but were also fighting for the homosexuals that were suffering alongside them. Both groups were being punished for something that should not have mattered, and for something that they did not have control over. The women were not trying to be sexual at first, but merely wanted to express themselves through their clothes like so many others all over the world were doing. However, other women were being shunned and criminalized just for wearing what they wanted to, so obviously they felt the need to fight for what they felt they deserved in life. But while some women were dressing feminine to take on the issues of the world, others were becoming something else entirely to take on the issues in their lives.

In 2014, women were fighting for the right to individuality and self-expression, but years earlier others were fighting oppression. In 1966, the Black Panther organization formed to fight the long tradition of police brutality and oppression in the world around them. They did not want to integrate into society but wanted to change it for the better and knew that nonviolent protests

would not give them the liberation they wanted (“The Black Panther Movement,” 2019). The founders of the movement formed a distinct uniform that allowed for recognition and even shaped how American fashion would look in the future. “This uniform included a black leather jacket, powder blue shirt, black pants, black shoes, black beret, and optional black gloves” (Vargas, 2009, p. 96). The women adopted this fashion as well and would wear closely cropped hair with what was considered men’s clothes at the time, including tailored suits and vests (Calahan & Zachary, 2020). Wearing these items was revolutionary for women since they were typically wearing dresses and other very distinctly feminine clothing. By wearing this uniform, these women were making a statement that they were willing to fight for what they believed in, and it really set them apart from other women at the time. The black beret in particular went on to become an iconic symbol of Black Power and meant that you were a supporter of the Black Panther Party, even if you were not a member (Vargas, 2009, p. 96). This is not the first time in history that we have seen a hat become a marker of revolution. In the French Revolution, the bonnet rouge was also a marker of support to the revolutionaries, and it allowed civilians to show support for the revolution in a time when doing so could potentially get you killed. Another significant event coming from the uniform of the Black Panther party was the manifestation of the ethos “Black is Beautiful” (Vargas, 2009 p. 97). This phrase was the slogan of the Grandassa modeling group, which was a group of African American models formed in the 1960s who were photographed to show that natural black was beautiful and that the African Americans should stop trying to conform to the beauty trends of the white women around them (Calahan & Zachary, 2020). The Black Panther group were alluring and captured the attention of onlookers with their very distinct style, whether they were supporters of the cause or not, and resulted in the group becoming an icon in the fashion, film, music, and even advertising industries (Vargas,

2009, p. 97). Elements of their dress can still be seen in fashion today, including all black outfits and the sleek look of the menswear on women.

Items of clothing have deep political and social influences that most do not think too much about, but does hair have just as much meaning during a revolution? It was a transgressive statement of self-expression in the '60s and '70s. Hair was a marker of racial difference early on when the colonizers first arrived and became a part of social construction in society long before that. Women in African cultures used to wear gold and shells in their hair, and this beading and braiding was a sign of cultural pride in later generations. However, members of black communities would later judge women who did not wear their hair straight, but instead chose to wear it naturally like their ancestors once had. However, in the 1970s, natural hair became a different statement with the emergence of the Afro and those same women who had been wearing their hair naturally before paved the way for this embodiment of self-expression (Calahan & Zachary, 2020). "Afros became part of a beauty standard that grew out of political struggle and sent a powerful message of change to American society" (Vargas, 2009, p. 97). The emergence of this trend meant the rejection of the white beauty standards that African American women had been adhering to. But respectability politics had a different way of viewing the new cultural awakening, and these standards were forced on South Africans and black Americans. Young schoolgirls were forced to shave off braids into a close-cropped style to erase all ethnic markers of identity and assimilate them further. The beauty salons where these African American women would gather were extremely important to the politics surrounding these communities, as they were where the women would gather to talk about their issues, whether it be where to shop and how to deal with your husband or how the country is being run. These salons would even run voter registration drives, and some would host small protests (Calahan & Zachary, 2020). These

places that most would just think of as places to get their hair done were actually impacting the political landscape around their communities and were allowing these women feel empowered and proud of the lives that they were living.

Protest clothing is not necessarily something that we think of when we look back on history, but those garments are just as important as the history itself. They represent complex beliefs and allow outsiders to connect more with the cause they are fighting for. Women around the world who were allowed to wear clothes that others deemed “sexual” could relate to the cause of those who were fighting for that individuality. Everyone who saw a member of the Black Panther movement could easily identify them because of their distinct and influential clothing, and those people knew what the movement stood for because of their distinct dress. African American women would relate to one another as the phenomenon of wearing one’s hair naturally swept the country and pushed for reform while using their hair as a symbol for cultural differences. All of these groups know how it feels to be oppressed and judged for simply looking a certain way, and because of that all their causes are parallel to one another. Every female activist is fighting for something that they believe in, and their clothing is used to further their cause and make a statement about those beliefs. Clothing choices seem like a minor detail in history, and they are generally overlooked because of it, but in reality they make all the difference in helping us understand what these groups were actually fighting for.

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