

Pants of protest

Humorous yet shocking, mundane yet intimate – underpants have proved a useful tool for change. Katie Dancey-Downs examines the power of political undercrackers.

The constituency office was empty on the drizzly Saturday morning that artist and theatre maker Lorna Rees strung up her knickers.

'No-one should be able to photo my pants unless I want them to,' read the slogan hastily scrawled across the freshly unboxed undies, which had been sewn together into bunting. The banner referred to the 'anti-upskirting bill' which Lorna's member of parliament had delayed in the UK House of Commons the previous day.

The private members' bill sought to make it an offence to take photos up

people's skirts without their permission. But Conservative MP Christopher Chope shouted the one word to stop the Voyeurism (Offences) Bill in its tracks on 15 June 2018: 'Object!' Rather than passing to the next stage, the bill would now have to go through a lengthy process, involving a debate and vote.

Angered by this, Laura and a colleague decided to take action. The next morning, they pulled over on the main road into the Saxon town of Christchurch in Dorset, southwest England. Lorna, giggling, pinned the bunting around the front door of Chope's office and hopped back into the

car. Now, nestled between the wheelie bins and council-maintained flower planters, was a metaphorical middle finger to the local member of parliament.

Underwear makes a bold political statement. Take the famous Miss America protest in 1968, where women threw items that they felt represented their oppression – including underwear, wigs and false eyelashes – into a 'freedom trash can', sparking the myth of bra-burning feminists and kicking the whole movement up a gear. Organizer of the stunt, Carol Hanish, used words that could be applied to any number of



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protests where underpants are front and centre: 'The personal is political.'¹

That was true in Ireland after a man was acquitted of rape in 2018. In the Cork court he argued that the survivor's lace thong suggested she was open to having sex with someone – not the first time that a victim's clothing had been handed around an Irish courtroom. Pictures of frilly knickers flooded social media, along with the hashtag #ThisIsNot-Consent. People stripped down to their underwear in the streets and Irish MP Ruth Coppinger even brought out a pair of pants in the Dáil (Irish parliament).

In Mexico, since 2002, hundreds of farmers clad in nothing but hats and underpants have regularly descended into the capital's city centre, wiggling their hips and tapping their feet to upbeat music. Both men and women are topless. The group known as *Movimiento de Los 400 Pueblos* (Movement of 400 Ethnic Groups) is made up of Indigenous people from the State of Veracruz and aims to draw attention to the human rights abuses that they face.

Most of us see underpants every day, so why do they make such powerful political tools?

Knickers to upskirting

In a Christchurch café, Lorna unpacks the contents of a canvas bag onto the table: a scrapbook of newspaper clippings from her underpants protests and a string of knicker bunting. An Agent Provocateur label pokes out of one pair.

Her demonstration outside Christopher Chope's office was not the first time she had disagreed with her MP. She had written him letters and emails over the years, raising grievances against his voting habits which she describes as 'anti-equal rights'. But when he stalled the anti-upskirting bill she was moved to protest.

'I was livid,' Lorna says. 'I stewed on it all night and the next day I very quickly grabbed some unused and clean knickers from the back of my drawer.'

Lorna wrote her words of protest across the pants with a marker pen and hastily ran them through her sewing machine, leaving a nest of ribbons behind on the table. As an artist, she says it was a below par creation.

After stringing up her knicker bunting, Lorna posted a photo of her act of dissent on social media, thinking a few dozen people might find it entertaining. When she checked her phone a few hours later,

the post had gone viral. One of her tweets, including the hashtag #KnickersToChope, has now been liked 27,000 times.

'There were a few gross replies, but mainly people just found it really funny,' Lorna says.

The story hit newspapers throughout the world, a news crew turned up on Lorna's doorstep (while she was out), she found herself talking about it on national radio.

'I needed to grab the moment to keep this in the news,' Lorna remembers. 'So, we could keep the pressure on.'

A phantom copycat soon emerged. By Monday morning, frilly thongs adorned Chope's Westminster office, presumably installed by another MP.

'Good to see some redecorating happening in my corridor over the weekend. Christopher Chope's door looking much better,' Green MP Caroline Lucas tweeted.

Chope told the media that his objection was only against the procedure of private members' bills passing unscrutinized – and not against the content of the bill itself.

The law finally came into force in April 2019 but, in the meantime, Lorna Rees took her protest pants further. She designed a stage for the Women's March in London opposing Donald Trump, stringing up lines and lines of underpants bunting decorated with words like 'knickers to sexism' and 'love not hate,' all while a baby Trump balloon soared overhead in nothing but a nappy. It was after this that Lorna began to receive rape and death threats. She was frightened. But a part of her wondered, did knickers really have the power to induce such fury?

Posting pink chaddis

In January 2009, members of the right-wing Sri Ram Sena (SRS) group in Mangalore, India, violently attacked a group of women for going to a pub. As the women ran away, the men slapped, pushed, and threw them to the ground. This, they claimed, was in response to the women violating Hindu values.² Everything was filmed. SRS had invited the camera crew.³

When journalist and activist Nisha Susan read about the attack, she was on holiday in a small town elsewhere in India, along with friends from back home in Karnataka – the state where SRS is also based. Her group was a mix of young men and women, among them lawyers and journalists. They had never been

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naive about what was happening in India and had all been part of activist groups. Yet one evening that week, when they walked into a local bar and saw only male faces staring back at them, Nisha and her friends left.

'I remember thinking that something had shifted for us. There's that sense of fear,' Nisha says.

Around a fortnight later, SRS made an announcement: Valentine's Day was cancelled in Karnataka.

'One of their big threats was if they saw any couple together, they would marry them off,' Nisha explains. Key SRS members were arrested as a precautionary measure.

Just days before Valentine's Day, a 16-year-old Hindu girl named Ashwini was caught talking to a Muslim boy on the bus in a village near Mangalore. Suspected members of a rightwing vigilante group grabbed her and took her to a police station, where her parents were summoned.⁴ Her father slapped her.

Following the public humiliation, Ashwini took her own life.

These incidents continued to occupy Nisha's mind and the next month, while lying in bed in a foul mood, she turned to Facebook as an outlet for her frustration. She set up a group that was intended as a joke: 'The Consortium of Pub-going, Loose and Forward Women'. A few friends joined the group and laughed together. By the time Nisha woke up in the morning, there were around 100 members and growing.

First came the idea that the group should send something to SRS – perhaps Valentine's cards, but the idea that stuck was sending *chaddis* (knickers). Even better, they would send pink chaddis. This childish Hindi word for pants has another meaning as a derogatory way to describe rightwingers, inspired by the trademark khaki shorts of the nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh group.⁵

'I think it opened them up as objects of comedy, rather than men of great

moral courage,' Nisha says. She wanted to bring down the curtain, to expose SRS's insincerity.

Within a few days, Nisha remembers, people were sending underpants from across the country. One man bought a few thousand pairs, then turned them pink using his own dyeing business. Muscled bikers sported tiny pink pants on their handlebars. Very proper suburban women took serious photos of themselves holding up big pairs of knickers.

'This was one of the first big viral things that happened on Facebook in India,' Nisha says. 'So I don't think we had a real sense of the scale.'

Some people sent chaddis directly to SRS, while others dropped off huge boxes at hubs. Nisha and other activists fielded phone calls and media requests.

Nisha has her eyes on deeper change: 'Political movements don't work because of some viral moment on social media. I felt that whatever was working was on the

backbone of existing political groups and networks.'

But however women protest, Nisha says, they will be criticized: 'It's harder and harder to be light-hearted in protests for women.'

Protests like this one are so useful, she says, because they refuse to participate in the game set up by men.

The rightwingers tried to fight back, Nisha remembers: 'They would send messages to the press saying, look at how badly brought up [the activists] are. Their parents should be ashamed of them.'

The Consortium sent messages back: their parents were also participating in the chaddi deliveries.

Following the Pink Chaddi campaign, Nisha says that anti-Valentine's Day protests did disappear for a long time. A joint media investigation into SRS also exposed the group as agitators for hire; they were caught on camera agreeing to vandalize an art exhibition in exchange for a fee.⁶

'They were a small group, but they made an ambitious leap that blew up in their faces,' Nisha says. 'There were just too many people on our side. There were lots of people who would call themselves rightwing, but still thought beating up women was a bad thing.'

Regrettably, that sentiment has shifted, she says. Pramod Muthalik, founder of SRS and object of the Pink Chaddi Campaign's ridicule, now has a very real seat at the table with the chief minister of the state.⁷ In 2018, nine years after the attack on the pub-going women in Mangalore, all those accused were acquitted, including Muthalik. Not a single victim appeared in court to testify. Muthalik called for young Muslim girls to be banned from attending school in hijabs, a rule which has come into effect in some colleges. Karnataka is now in another political moment centred around women's clothing.

Underwear as armour

On the surface, piles of pants and knicker bunting might seem fun, even silly. But underneath, serious issues are being addressed.

In 2015, artist Kubra Khademi walked her neighbourhood streets in Kabul, Afghanistan, wearing metal plates representing underwear. She said that when she was abused as a child, she had wished her underwear was made of steel. Her performance piece was a deliberate provocation, designed to get the attention of people

who regularly harass women on the street. People threw stones. Others sent death threats. Khademi is now in hiding.

Perhaps more widely known, is the international SlutWalk movement. Spawned in Toronto, Canada, after a police officer said that 'women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized', rallies and marches raise awareness of victim-blaming, rape-culture, and gender-based violence.⁸ In this movement, both words and clothing have power; some demonstrators proudly turn out in underwear, while others deliberately choose to wear casual clothing. They are reclaiming both the streets, and the word 'slut'. Rape and harassment, the movement shows, cannot be blamed on what people wear.

In Maboneng, Johannesburg, visitors to the 2016 festive season were expecting to pose for photos with twinkling lights. Instead, the backdrop was underpants.

Jenny Nijenhuis is one of the artists behind SA's Dirty Laundry.⁹ She started looking for rape and sexual assault statistics in South Africa and struggled to find reliable information. The search was motivated by her own experience of being sexually abused as a child. The possible number of rapes Jenny came up with, based on a 2013 Medical Research Council survey, was up to 3,600 a day.¹⁰

Jenny joined forces with performance artist Nondumiso Lwazi Msimanga, also a sexual assault survivor.

They started by asking other survivors to donate used underwear. Collection points sprang up, and as people handed over their donations, something else happened. They came with their stories.

'It quickly became apparent that the whole project was going to be a cathartic storytelling kind of connection,' Jenny says. 'We became a community of people.'

The Metro Police cordoned off the roads playing host to their installation, while Jenny and a team of volunteers unfurled over a kilometre of washing line. People's stories were displayed for all to see, impossible to ignore, and forcing the city to acknowledge the reality. This was not just underwear, but a representation of people who had survived sexual assault in their own country, with each pair specific to that person: Gingham-checked pants with a white frill. Spiderman briefs. Nappies.

Placards displayed phrases like 'Rape culture is not in my culture' and 'For consent's sake'.

Nondumiso walked underneath pants held by safety pins, one of them a pair of her own briefs, as curious passers-by questioned her. Some disclosed their own stories. One man told Nondumiso about his struggle with how to talk to his niece, who had been beaten by her husband.

'It's so important to be able to talk about these things,' Nondumiso says. 'But it was so compelling, how people really wanted to talk to strangers and talk to each other as well.'

Over the course of the installation, conversations rumbled throughout the city and in SoMa Art + Space, where SA's Dirty Laundry was hosted. More people asked if they could donate, to stand in solidarity with those they knew who had been affected. By now, people travelled to Maboneng specifically to take photos under the lines of pants.

The washing line wasn't the only event in SA's Dirty Laundry's 10-day takeover. On a busy Friday night, Nondumiso climbed out of a taxi and into the cultural hub of Maboneng, dressed in a wedding gown made entirely of white pants. She had spent days digging through bundles of used underwear, choosing the pairs that were well-used, until she had so many she couldn't lift them.

'I was working with the weight of the dress, with the weight of the used underwear, and the weight of being on that line – of being part of the statistic,' Nondumiso says.

While party-goers staggered between venues, people spontaneously formed a protective circle around Nondumiso as she delivered her street performance, 'On The Line'. She looked at each piece of underwear above her. Representing what rape can do to a person, Nondumiso brought the idea of falling into her physicality. She felt the weight of each person represented on that line.

Nondumiso ripped off each pair of pants, rain falling on her bare skin. As she began singing the original version of the South African national anthem, she wore nothing but a child's pair of knickers.

At the end of the takeover, Jenny and Nondumiso spoke with people who had seen the performance. A group of young men asked questions about their responsibility in relation to the issue and discussed how they struggle with their relationship to the line. One young man told Nondumiso that he too is a survivor of sexual abuse.

'There was this real feeling from everybody that we spoke to, that they thought they were not alone,' Jenny says. They felt a significant healing of the community – and that others understood. By adding their voices to the conversation, they could make it easier for other people.

'That even happened for me personally, because I hadn't spoken about the story with my family until just before this all happened,' Jenny says.

Nondumiso feels similarly. SA's Dirty Laundry allowed her to open up about her own experiences, discussing how it had affected her and disconnected her from others. The people who spoke to Jenny and Nondumiso also helped them talk.

Pants of power

For Jenny Nijenhuis, the power of underwear is its intimacy – it's an item that's underneath your clothes and represents so much, including what it means to have it removed without your permission. There are also sexual connotations to

knickers. Put pants in a protest, and you turn the idea on its head.

'Everything about women's clothing agitates people,' says Nisha Susan. 'Your hair, your lipstick, your lack of lipstick: "Why can't she doll herself up a bit? Why does she look so dull?"'

And in installing her Dorset knicker bunting, Lorna Rees learnt that small actions can lead to powerful change. Our culture forms our future, she says.

'I think there's something about domestic and intimate items that have a cut through,' Lorna says. 'There's something powerful about this thing that you wear close to your skin and your genitals that says something about the female lived experience. And I think that's part of the reason it's a powerful symbol.'

Pants of protest continue to make headlines. People are still angered, intrigued, and amused; they are offended or empowered; they do a double take instead of walking on by. If these stories are anything to go by, underwear might just have a secret superpower: getting political attention. ●

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