



BY VARISHA TARIQ

How pageant contestants tackle race, sexual assault, trafficking, and violence against women on and off the stage to change how we perceive protest and power

Tonight, I'd like to thank...

Sheynnis Palacios, Miss Universe Nicaragua 2003, who was targeted by her government for participating in the 2018 anti-government protests; Htet Htet Htun, Miss Universe Myanmar 2021, who carried a scroll onstage on which was written 'Pray for Myanmar' following the coup d'état; Bernadette Ong, Miss Universe Singapore 2021, who wore a gown with 'Stop Asian Hate' written across it...

Judged live on television, dissected on social media, debated by scholars, punished by governments, dismissed or ridiculed in the court of public opinion, and constantly at the center of conversations around feminism and beauty standards, Miss Universe – the 75-year-old institution that began life as a marketing gimmick for a swimsuit company – has, over the decades, seeped into the global consciousness to become part of modern pop culture.

For some, involvement in pageants has proved an effective escape from humble beginnings or a launchpad into the film and modeling industries, while others return to their day-to-day lives following a brief stint in the spotlight.

Then there are the contestants who break free from the expectations and constraints associated with being a beauty queen to use their voice to speak for those who can't, such as animals, the planet, or the disenfranchised.

Two things, it seems, can be simultaneously true: one can be a beautiful woman, and also want to change the world for other women too. Who knew?

...Altynai Botoyarova, Kyrgyzstan's Miss Universe 2023, whose swimsuit category cape highlighting violence against women in her country resulted in her being accused of "damaging the country's image" for which she was forced to make a public apology; Swe Zin Htet, Miss Burma 2019 who became the first openly lesbian woman to compete in a Miss Universe competition; Nadeen Ayoub, Palestine's Miss Universe 2025, whose hand-painted cape featured

the long-disputed sites of the Dome of the Rock and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in 2025 – two years after the invasion of Gaza...

While beauty pageantry isn't inherently anti-feminist, there's no denying that it has been cultivated and curated to be more palatable for the male gaze. So, who can blame the women who access these platforms to create better opportunities for themselves and to raise awareness about issues they care about?

Refuting accusations that their philanthropic words are merely performative, many pageant winners have gone on to make a real difference, such as Miss Asia Pacific 2000, Dia Mirza, who emerged from her win to champion animal rights and advocate for climate safety and wildlife protection, resulting in her appointment as the UN Environment's Goodwill Ambassador for India in 2017. Likewise, Finnish-American beauty queen, Armi Helena Kuusela-Williams, who won the very first Miss Universe contest in 1952, became renowned for her work in raising awareness for cancer research; and Miss Globe 2025, Albanian-American Samantha Sarelli uses her platform to raise awareness of human trafficking.

...Thae Su Nyein, Miss Grand Myanmar 2024, who was stripped of her title after posting political videos online; Itr Esen, Miss Turkey 2017 who was sacked for an "offensive" tweet regarding the July 15, 2016 coup attempt of president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan; Olivia Yacé, Miss Universe Africa and Oceania, who walked away from her title over what she called a "diminished role" and urged Black women to "continue entering spaces where you are not expected"...

The Miss Peru 2018 pageant proved a seminal moment in beauty pageant history. At the moment when contestants would traditionally share their body measurements (*share their body measurements!*), the 23 contestants used their time on stage to highlight the country's high rates of violence against women, resulting in the sobering statistics that "more than 70 percent of women in our country are victims of street harassment", and "65 percent of university

women are assaulted by their partners".

...Milla Magee, Miss England 2024, who quit during the semi-finals after claiming contestants were expected to "charm affluent men" who sponsored the pageant; and Angela Ponce, the first transgender woman to become Spain's Candidate for Miss Universe 2018.

Seven weeks before she won Miss World 1998, 18-year-old Israeli Linor Abargil was raped at knifepoint, strangled and stabbed by a man called Uri Shlomo Nur. Following her win, frustration with the police over the prosecution of Nur lead her to go public with her attack and she became a well-known activist, encouraging women to report their assaults to the police. And as Miss Universe 2019, South African Zozibini Tunzi continues to make strides in her fight against gender violence. Miss World 2000, Priyanka Chopra Jonas, is a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador who actively advocates for children's rights, girls' education, and global health.

For Miss Universe 1981, Venezuelan Irene Sáez, winning was about turning her platform political. Eschewing the Hollywood offers that came her way after her win at the age of 19, Sáez ran for and became mayor of Chacao, Caracas.

"A political independent, she focuses on pragmatism rather than ideology," noted the *LA Times*. "She has hired top-notch administrators and listens to their advice about setting the budget and taxes and running public services, such as the police and garbage collection. At the same time, she has avoided the endemic political patronage and corruption that have undermined Venezuelans' confidence in government."

Her December 1995 re-election saw her win 96 percent of the vote, and caused her losing opponent, lawyer Paulo Carrillo, to angrily dub her "a plastic doll".

For a woman coming from the beauty pageant circuit, being judged on her looks must have been the least of her worries.

The Head That Wears The Crown