

SlutWalk: Resisting Sexual Shaming

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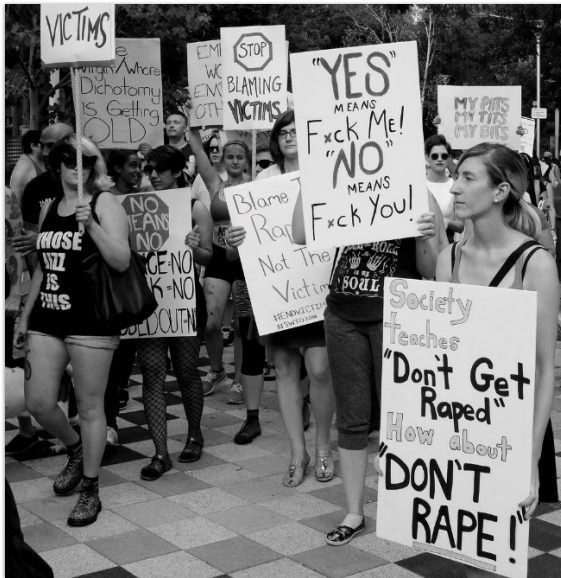


Gendered body protests: SlutWalks.

SlutWalk began when a small group of feminists in Toronto Canada, organized a protest in response to the comment of a police officer, “Women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized.” (O’Reilly, 2015). Thousands of women showed up, many of them dressed in provocative dress, such as lingerie, low cut tops, and tight short skirts. Subsequently, SlutWalks have been staged in global contexts to protest the social climate in which sexual violence against women is tolerated and women victims are blamed and shamed. Numerous SlutWalks have been held around the world to challenge rape culture and to signal active resistance to the dominant discourses and the heteronormativity of sexuality. The SlutWalk movement has generated extensive media coverage, and robust discussion and debate.

Dressing as sluts generates interest and media attention to the event. When the participants in the SlutWalk dress like sluts, they ask the audience to interrogate their beliefs about the causes of rape. On the most basic level SlutWalks question the myth that conservative dress is a rape preventive measure, and that provocative dress warrants rape. SlutWalk protests also challenge the sexualization of girls and women. Friedman (2015) argues that the Slut Walk movement recognizes and questions why sexuality is our most reliable and limited currency.

The appearance and clothing of the marchers has generated attention and controversy within the press, and within the feminist community. The SlutWalk is a grassroots effort of the students and young women, a protest of their design that generates excitement and passion. Many individuals in the general public, and older feminists often do not share the enthusiasm of the marchers for the mode of dress as a form of protest. However, the raunch presentation is an important element of the drama and part of the appeal to thousands of protestors.



What was/is exciting about SlutWalk was/is its ability to capture the mainstream media's attention. Some have argued that SlutWalk has been instrumental in bringing feminism and feminist issues back onto the public's consciousness (Pollitt, 2011). Knowledge and images of the Slutwalk have been accompanied by widespread commentary, discussion and debate among news presenters, radio hosts, political and social pundits, bloggers and DJ and within the academic and feminist community. For some of us in the feminist community, SlutWalk represented a bold, original, creative, and engaging form of protest that was developed by a new generation of feminists raising their voices. Their protest was presented as media-savvy street theater that connected the personal and the political.

The Message(s) of SlutWalk

A strength of SlutWalk is the effective articulation of multiple feminist messages. A part of the message was expressed through the clothing and appearance of the marchers. They also printed their message on poster board. Here are a few of their messages: *We are tired of being

oppressed by slut- shaming; of being judged by our sexuality and feeling unsafe as a result.

*Being in charge of our sexual lives should not mean that we are opening ourselves to an expectation of violence, regardless if we participate in sex for pleasure or work. *No one should equate enjoying sex with attracting sexual assault. (SlutWalk Toronto 2011)



We demand our bodies and all bodies be respected.
Our worth as human beings is not determined by our sexuality.

No matter what I wear
No matter what I look like
No matter what my gender expression is
No matter how much, how little or what kind of sex I have
No matter what I've done before
No matter where I come from
No matter how my body has been 'devalued' by others
No matter what I've been called

MY BODY IS NOT AN INSULT.

As shown below other messages about sexual assault were included such as consent.



Victim Blaming

SlutWalk calls attention to the elements of a rape culture that threaten women's safety in multiple contexts. SlutWalk objected to the victim-blaming suggestions that women's dress or conduct is an explanation for the sexual assault of women. Protestors challenged the societal conception that the way women dressed could be a reason for men's rape of women. Rather than telling women how to dress, we should be teaching men how to behave.

In societal scripts of sexual encounters, women are often cast as the gatekeeper, the partner responsible for determining if sex will occur. Women's gatekeeper role has become a salient and fetishized part of "typical" sexual encounters. Because women are identified as responsible for pacing and limiting sexual activity, they are often the ones blamed or ridiculed if wanted sexual encounters go "too far". Women are supposed to demonstrate passivity, saying "no" or limiting the progression of sexual activity requires transgression of these frameworks (Milnes, 2004). Thus, these discourses may pressure women to agree to unwanted sexual

activities or behaviors (Gavey & McPhillips, 1999). In this double-bind, where women are named responsible for pacing but afraid of the consequences of saying no, women are blamed for instances of unwanted, male-initiated sexual activity (McHugh et al., 2009). In this *victim-blaming* model, women are identified as ineffective gatekeepers whose “no”s were unclear or inconsequential. Because the sexual encounter occurred and progressed, they must have been “asking for it” (Bolotnikova & Evans, 2012).

Slut Shaming

On the most basic level, the SlutWalk objects to the practice of slut shaming. The use of negative words (e.g., slut) teaches us that female sexuality is wrong and that women who are sexual should be viewed as bad (Tannebaum, 1999; 2015). Although many dismiss slut-shaming as trivial, slut-bashing can have negative outcomes, both for the targets of the shaming and the bystanders to the interactions (McHugh, 2018). The targets of slut bashing report depression, anxiety, body dissatisfaction, self-consciousness, isolation and shame (Tannebaum, 1999; McHugh, 2018). Labeling a girl/woman a slut, like other forms of harassment (e.g., cat calling, sexual comments, oogling) is mundane, which means that it happens everyday. But the prevalence of such harassment does not mean that the interactions are not eventful or harmful. Rather, the repeated nature of slut bashing is part of the pattern that produces negative consequences (Tannebaum, 2015). Even when the girl/woman is labeled only once in what the perpetrator may characterize as a non-hostile or even “friendly” way, the message that others are *monitoring her appearance and sexuality* is clearly communicated and can have an impact on an entire circle of friends or even the broader community (e.g., the high school, the neighborhood). Researchers have examined women’s exposure to sexist events using daily diary studies, and their findings indicate a connection between women’s mundane experience of sexism and their

mental health (Landrine & Klonff, 1997; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 1998). Women who experienced higher levels of sexist comments, harassment, and negative labeling also experienced higher levels of depression and anxiety (Landrine & Klonff, 1997; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 1998).

SlutWalk objects to the slut shaming of women, and to the sexualization of women. We live in a society that consistently and persistently sexualizes girls and women. Sexualization occurs when a girl or woman is valued primarily for her sex appeal or sexy behavior, when she is held to a narrow standard of beauty, when her physical appearance is equated with sexiness, when she is viewed as an object for sexual use, or when society inappropriately imposes sexuality on her (Zurbriggen et al., 2007). Sexualization is closely related to sexual objectification, which is when a girl or woman is viewed as an object, a body, or a collection of body parts (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) rather than as a whole person. The message inherent in both sexualization and sexual objectification is that a girl or woman's worth is limited to her appearance and/or sex appeal. Her value is reduced to the pleasure derived by others from consumption of her appearance. The media are saturated with examples of the sexualization of girls and women in television, movies, music lyrics and videos, the Internet, video games, advertisements, etc. (Zurbriggen et al., 2007). The SlutWalk is a parody, an expose of the commercial sexualization of women.

The restriction and repression of women's sexuality

Interligi & McHugh (2018) discussed the discourses regarding women's sexuality as united in their underlying message: that women's sexual behavior is only appropriate under specific circumstances and conditions. These heteronormative constructions limit the kinds of sexuality that are deemed normal, acceptable, and appropriate for both young adult and senior

women (Bryant & Schofield, 2007). In each case, women's sexuality is subject to ageist, androcentric, and heteronormative perspectives that offer women a rigid, limited, and unfulfilling sexual script.

Young and older women alike struggle to understand and construct their own sexual desire, and claim sexual agency and sexual entitlement under the pressures of androcentric, contradictory and stereotypic discourses (Interligi & McHugh, 2018). Both adolescents and elderly women are in developmental transitions with potential for both self-agency and/or derogation by others. Desire is an important part of women's embodied and relational self; desire connects us to our bodies and, at the same time, connects us to others (Tolman, 2000, 2005). Women's desire has not been adequately acknowledged in a male-oriented culture that emphasizes men's desire and women's responsiveness. Tolman (2000) saw these cultural attitudes as an explanation for women's inability or reluctance to admit to or to articulate their own sexual desire. "When one is treated as the object of the desires of others, and treats oneself as such, the ability even to know one's own needs and desires is undercut" (Tolman, 2000, p. 199). Older women, in particular, may be reluctant to acknowledge their own sexual desires.

For women, sex has been deemed acceptable only if it is heterosexual, intercourse-centered, and occurring within a monogamous relationship (or in service of forming one; Bay-Cheng, 2003). Young adult women's sexuality is regarded as normal only if it is undesirous and passive—occurring in reaction to a male partner's desire or for his pleasure—or if their "empowered" sexuality imitates what has been identified as "sexy" by US patriarchal culture (Hollway, 1984; Lamb, 2010a; Tolman, 2000; Ussher, 1994)

Slut-shaming and prude-shaming. Women's sexuality is routinely judged more punitively or using different criteria than men's (Bordini & Sperb, 2012; Kreager et al, 2009).

The particular sexual behaviors, attitudes, and practices subject to this *sexual double standard* have evolved over time, but women's sexuality continues to be monitored, policed, and controlled more actively than men's. Women who express their sexuality in ways that are incongruent with accepted norms risk social ridicule in the forms of *slut-shaming* (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002; Harden, 2014; Jackson & Cram, 2003; Kreager & Staff, 2009), and *prude-shaming* (Fischer, 2015). In slut shaming, women are condemned for "promiscuous" or "age-inappropriate" sexual behaviors, such as having more than one sexual or romantic partner at a time, engaging in "alternative" sexual behaviors, or dating younger men. When women are prude-shamed, women are criticized for their choice not to participate in sexual activity (Fischer, 2015). Notably, for both types of shaming, the specific offensive or objectionable behaviors vary according to the cultural, racial, or class identity of the transgressor (e.g., Armstrong, Hamilton, Armstrong, & Seeley, 2014).

In both slut-shaming and prude-shaming, women's sexuality is socially policed to conform to what has been deemed acceptable and "normal" (Fischer, 2015). Further, this practice silences women whose sexuality varies from the norm (Paul & Hayes, 2002). When women's experiences do not meet society's expectations, they may self-blame and choose not to discuss their sexuality. This has the dual effect of unjustly ostracizing diverse and alternative forms of sexual expression, and further reifying the existing socio-sexual norms in discourse. Even if women actively and agentially reject dominant notions of female sexuality, they may experience internalized feelings of shame, guilt, or regret around their sexual decisions as a result of slut- or prude-shaming (Bryant & Schofield, 2007; Paul & Hayes, 2002).

Adopting a sex positive perspective

SlutWalks are also conducted as a movement toward and celebration of positive sexuality. On an individual and societal level, adopting a sex positive approach involves acknowledging and celebrating cultural diversity in sexual practices, while simultaneously recognizing, and respecting individual variations in sexual preferences and meanings (Williams, Prior, & Wegner, 2013). SlutWalk, like social media and blogs attempt to spread the message of sex-positivity, an approach towards human sexuality that “regards all consensual activities as fundamentally healthy and pleasurable and encourages sexual pleasure and experimentation” (e.g., Gabosch, 2014, para. 8). A sex-positive approach or attitude has been described as containing three core components: 1) refraining from making moral judgments about others’ sexual behavior; 2) respecting others’ preferences; and 3) encouraging individuals to be active agents in learning which practices they do and do not enjoy (Fabello, 2014).

Using Raunch to Resist slut shaming

“As a resistance tactic to slut shaming and rape culture, raunch is used as a tool for women to claim bodily and sexual agency while also calling attention to masculinist objectification in provocative ways.” (Watson & Mason, 2015). Watson and Mason (2015) examine the complexities and controversies within feminism of using raunch to forward positive sexuality and sexual agency while at the same time decrying sexual violence and the sexualized and objectifying male gaze. These arguments over the appropriateness and the pragmatics of using slut visuals to challenge a rape culture parallel the divides regarding the potential for women’s sexual empowerment contrasted with the mimicking of male sexual attitudes and scripts.

For example, O’Keefe (2014) questions the value of SlutWalk’s use of a sexualized gender protest—a protest which uses the female body to explicitly call attention to issues that pertain to women’s bodies. O’Keefe’s (2014) analysis centers on the subversive use of exaggeration and parody as essential to the effectiveness of the protest, and O’Keefe concludes that the SlutWalk is not a parody and hence does not subvert patriarchal norms but rather repeats them. O’Keefe rejects women flaunting their sexuality as effective protest. This dialogue about the meaning and effectiveness of the SlutWalk then is parallel to positions on how or if young women can be or are empowered by adopting the sexualized and erotic costumes, or the sexual activities endorsed within an androcentric and patriarchal context. SlutWalks attract the male gaze, and “are as much a spectacle to be gazed upon as it is a march of defiance.” (O’Keefe, 2014, p 7). According to O’Keefe (2014, p 7) “To be a proud slut is not to challenge the policing of women’s sexuality but to reinforce the limited ways in which it is acceptable for women to be sexual.”

On the other hand, the critical reaction of O’Keefe and other (feminist) critics may be viewed as reinforcement of existing androcentric shaming of women enacting a sexual stance. What some may not appreciate about the Slutwalk movement is that in addition to protesting the victim blaming reactions of police and other authorities, Slutwalks are attempts of participating women to strip away the shame attached to women’s sexuality. Women protestors may also be resisting the repression and derogation of women’s expression of their sexuality by proclaiming “Don’t shame me --I am a sexual being.” In contemporary society, a provocative outfit may be the appropriate attire in which to proclaim I have no shame about being a sexual being. A woman wearing long sleeves and a high collar or a sweat suit may not convince us that she has no shame about her sexuality. Other protests against violence against women and against victim blaming

are not designed to address issues of shame; this is what distinguishes SlutWalk from Take Back the Night.

As the original organizers state in their analysis that the movement is not coherent, and has different meanings and responses in different locations as conducted by different groups, and yet there is some reaction to the word slut that has resulted in an explosion of protest, especially among young women (Teekah, Scholtz, Friedman, & O'Reilly, 2015).

A transnational movement

By the end of the 2011, SlutWalks emerged organically in over 200 cities and 40 nations, mobilizing tens of thousands of women, men and children. In 2014, although the movement had slowed, SlutWalks continued to take place in major cities such as Baltimore, Bloomington, Denver, Edmonton, Guelph, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Melbourne, Miami, Milwaukee, Munich, Orlando, Ottawa, Philadelphia, Portland, Reno, Rio De Janeiro, Rochester, Salt Lake City, Seattle, Toronto, Vancouver, Victoria (Canada), Warsaw and Washington DC. In July 2014 a record breaking 11,000 people turned up to the fourth annual SlutWalk in Reykjavík, Iceland.



What about the Slut Walk led to the passionate reproduction of it across varied global locales? SlutWalk has been adapted in all corners of the globe, perhaps because of the uniformity of the shaming of women around their sexuality: “We find that women who express their sexuality positively either in clothing or in choice of relationships or by breaking any kind of sexual norm are called by exactly the same name everywhere” (Borah & Nandi, 2012, p 418).

As the original organizers stated (Teekah et al., 2015), the movement is not coherent; it has different meanings and responses in different locations as conducted by different groups, and it does not always include the element of raunch. For example, marches are illegal in Singapore, so the SlutWalk occurred and developed secretly there through a series of events, including a film, a martial arts class, and a Speakers Corner address; participants were told to “come as you are” (O’Reilly, 2015). In contrast, the SlutWalk in Hong Kong was a large march and rally. The Hong Kong organizers were recruited from a diverse activist network, and their use of the word slut was strategic: a way to blast their message and get media attention (O’Reilly, 2015). In the

2011 SlutWalk in India, the organizers used the term *besharmi morcha* (shameless protest) to speak to the Indian context, and participants were advised to dress modestly (O'Reilly, 2015). The term slut is problematic in international contexts, according to feminists connected to the transnational feminist movement, because the term *slut* has been introduced into many languages and cultures through colonialism and imperialism (Mohanty, as cited in Watson & Mason, 2015). Thus, although the SlutWalk movement has encouraged the organization of resistance to violence against women and raised consciousness regarding the sexualization of women globally, there is no consensus on the reclamation of the word slut or the use of raunch in connection to these rallies.

For some, SlutWalks re-articulate or take back the word slut from its negative imagery, to embrace the word as emblematic of women who are in control of and unashamed of their sexuality. An analysis of the power of Slut Walks is tied to an understanding of the power of the label “slut” to shame and restrict women’s sexual expression. According to Flood (2013), there is relatively little space for the notion of a sexually desiring active and empowered female sexuality, at least one which is not defined entirely by narratives of mainstream pornography. In order to claim sexual empowerment, some believe that we need to subvert and reclaim the power of the label “slut.” Attwood (2015) argues that “in the contemporary moment slut functions for some as an impossible space, the space of contradictions that cannot be resolved in language, theory or practice; the source of conflict between generations and feminisms” (p 244).

Identities and Intersectional Critiques

Transnational feminists are only one of many groups of feminists who have raised concerns about the SlutWalk movement. An initial controversy centered on the point that the

organizers failed to recognize that the word slut had different associations for groups of women whose bodies have been viewed as erotic/sexualized and rapeable; for example, Black women did not “see our lived experience reflected in SlutWalk” (The Black Women’s Blueprint, as cited by Pietsch, 2015). Other women of color have raised their voices to expose alternative experiences historically with sexual subjection through colonization and genocide. Intersectional feminists recognize that the label slut does not hold the same meaning or consequences for women across identities. Some women (of privilege) have the cultural capital to reclaim sluthood, whereas for women with certain identities, the label slut is fraught with danger (Citeroni, 2015). “The label slut differentially taints women of color, poor and working class women, queer women, ethnic women, migrant women, disabled women, trans women, women of the global South, and women with sexually transmitted diseases.” (Citeroni, 2015, p 397). Subsequently, the movement has engendered substantial discussion and debate about the labels slut and feminist. While some women feel disenfranchised by SlutWalk, others like Silvert (2015) felt a sense of being truly intimately connected with others, felt the power of support, and felt like a part of social change; “SlutWalk is our lifeline to each other.” (p 222). In their consideration of the many disagreements about the organization and conduct of the SlutWalks, Jones and Nelson (2015) concluded that critics and enthusiastic participants all agreed on the primary ideological point: to end rape and to send a strong message to stop the victim blaming of rape survivors.

Ongoing slutwalks invite collaboration.

SlutWalks continue to be held, on college campuses and in cities and towns across the US and around the world. Although the original and many other SlutWalks were the result of grass root organizing, some others are commercially organized. For example, The Amber Rose

SlutWalk is a day “festival filled with all types of cool activities, contests and giveaways, vendors, speakers, panelist, performances, live DJ, sign-making, educational booths, photo fun, free breast cancer exams, HIV testing and much more... We are part of the movement protesting sexual injustice, victim blaming, derogatory labelling and gender inequality.

Amber Rose SlutWalk

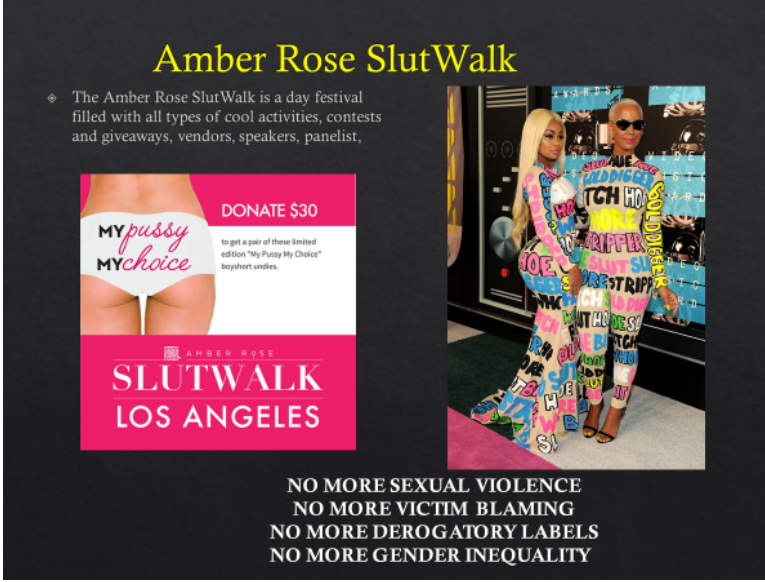
◆ The Amber Rose SlutWalk is a day festival filled with all types of cool activities, contests and giveaways, vendors, speakers, panelist,

MY pussy MY choice **DONATE \$30**
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AMBER ROSE
SLUTWALK
LOS ANGELES

NO MORE SEXUAL VIOLENCE
NO MORE VICTIM BLAMING
NO MORE DEROGATORY LABELS
NO MORE GENDER INEQUALITY

(amberroseslutwalk.com)



Using irony and parody to make a point

Although some have appreciated the SlutWalk as making a point through the use of parody and provocation, others have questioned the effectiveness of using raunch to protest the repression of women’s sexuality. The use of parody, humor and irony have been advocated by feminists as a way to call attention to and potentially transcend culturally created (double) binds on women’s lives (McHugh & Cosgrove, 2002).

Thinking about the messages conveyed through SlutWalk, and considering how women might expose and resist sexist, misogynist, and ageist regulation of women’s sexuality, we consider the potential impact of a SlutWalk engineered by and for older women. Would many older women feel comfortable exclaiming themselves as sexual beings? Would they find a way

to visually present themselves as sexual beings? Would sexually provocative attire and short skirts have the same effect when worn by women over sixty? Would O'Keefe consider this an appropriate parody? Would younger women voice doubts and judgments about the power of the message portrayed by older women exposing their bodies? Would a senior SlutWalk expose the way in which our culture has conceptualized and regulated both older and younger women in relation to men's sexual gaze and desire (i. e. young women as sex objects and older women as not sexual)? Would young women find themselves as judgmental in their response as many older women were to SlutWalk?



Conclusion

SlutWalks are an example of widespread resistance to the labelling of women based on their appearance and their sexual activity. Slut-shaming is a daily enactment of the sexual double standard, working to repress and restrict women's sexual agency while allowing a full

range of men's sexual behaviors and offenses. Not limited to criticisms of women's actual sexual activity, slut shaming acts as a weapon to relationally aggress against girls and women. Even when the label is applied casually or jokingly it reiterates that women can be appropriately monitored and judged for their sexual expression. The authors/organizers of SlutWalk (Friedman, et al, 2015) contend that "through passionate participation in SlutWalks, or through fiery opposition," SlutWalks have shifted "complacency and moved a generation" (p 8). Like the organizers of SlutWalk, we argue that the lesson is "the need to invent new events, new ideas, working solutions that inch us toward social transformation" (p 8).



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