

# FIGHT BACK AGAINST MISOGYNY AND RAPE!

The SlutWalk movement has struck a chord with young women across the world and has put the issue of rape and sexual assault back on the agenda with demonstrations taking place in many countries.

The phenomenon started in Toronto when a policeman instructed female students “to avoid looking like sluts” to protect their personal safety. This attitude puts the blame on the victims of rape, not the attacker. Since then, women have taken to the streets under the banner: “whatever we wear, wherever we go, yes means yes and no means no!” SlutWalk protests are now being organized across the country as women rise up to fight back.

The comments of the

Toronto policeman, along with the low conviction rate for rape, serve as a shocking reminder of how far we still have to go to change attitudes towards rape.

SlutWalk is therefore a much-needed initiative to promote “the radical notion that nobody deserves to be raped.”

With nearly 10,000 showing their support on Facebook, SlutWalk has captured the imagination of a generation of young women who have been brought up trapped between supposed equality and liberation and the stigmatization of our sexuality.

When women choose what to wear, we are not only choosing what feels comfortable or looks good, but negotiating our way through the maze of social and cultural values which our clothing embodies.

And let’s not forget the irony of a situation in which women are called sluts for wearing too little while in other parts of the world, women have been banned from wearing the niqab and covering up too much. These are all fronts in the struggle under capitalism for control over our bodies.

While the name SlutWalk has caused controversy, it is this in-your-face affront to conservative values that has appealed to many young women. However, the next step for the SlutWalk movement must be to broaden out. With so many cases of rape taking place within the family, any movement against sexual abuse needs to open itself up to women who have been victims of domestic abuse, who may not feel represented under the banner of SlutWalk.

These protests have the potential to be the first step

towards a new women's movement which can fight against violence, for control of our bodies, and also against cuts to women's jobs, benefits, and services. Being radical and militant is not something "masculine." Women have a proud history of struggle.

We have shown that we can be radical and fight back, and with spending cuts disproportionately affecting women, now is the time for a new women's movement.

We need a women's movement that can stand up for the interests of working-class women whose jobs are threatened by cuts; a movement that can fight for the rights of young women to have free and easy access to abortion and contraception; a movement that fights against racism and Islamophobia—we should be able to wear what we want, whether that's the hijab or the mini-skirt!

## **Can "Slut" Be Reclaimed?**

SlutWalk's controversial name has sparked a debate amongst feminists and women's rights campaigners about whether it is possible to re-

appropriate the word "slut" and whether it is a word that women want to reclaim.

"Slut" is a word that is used to demonize and humiliate women. As a response to a woman's sexual behavior, it exercises control over female sexuality through the verbal power to shame. It is a word that does not apply to men, who are praised for such behavior as "seducers," "libertines," or "babe-magnets."

Nobody should have moral judgments imposed on them for their enjoyment of sex. But it is solely women who bear the brunt of our society's habit of doing so. This is reflected by the US's shockingly low conviction rate for sexual assault. So much rape and sexual abuse goes unreported, precisely because of words like "slut" and the implication that what a woman wears, how much she has drunk, or what her sexual history is like, has an impact on the crime committed and how seriously it is taken when reported.

It is the impact imposing moral values on a woman's sexual behavior, in terms of either purity or

promiscuity that is precisely why words like "slut" cannot be reclaimed. Doing so trivializes the power that the word has to bully and undermine.

Attempts to reclaim language are generally unsuccessful. There have been various attempts to reclaim and decontaminate other words of hatred, such as "queer" and "nigger." Yet no community has successfully and coherently reclaimed a word. And this language remains steeped in oppression and discrimination.

If SlutWalk was to develop into a movement focused on reclaiming oppressive words, this would be a step backwards.

Not only is this re-appropriation not possible, but the struggle for women's liberation will not take place on the terrain of language. We will win equality by challenging sexist ideas and attitudes and by changing the material conditions which give rise to them.

To try to reclaim the word "slut" is to recognize the power of patriarchy and continue it rather than to challenge it.

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