

SlutWalks and the future of feminism

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More than 40 years after feminists tossed their bras and high heels into a trash can at the 1968 Miss America pageant — kicking off the bra-burning myth that will never die — some young women are taking to the streets to protest sexual assault, wearing not much more than what their foremothers once dubbed “objects of female oppression” in marches called SlutWalks.

It’s a controversial name, which is in part why the organizers picked it. It’s also why many of the SlutWalk protesters are wearing so little (though some are sweatpants-clad, too). Thousands of women — and men — are demonstrating to fight the idea that what women wear, what they drink or how they behave can make them a target for rape. SlutWalks started with a local march organized by five women in Toronto and [have gone viral](#), with events planned in more than 75 cities in countries from the United States and Canada to Sweden and South Africa. In just a few months, SlutWalks have become the most successful feminist action of the past 20 years. In a feminist movement that is often fighting simply to hold ground, SlutWalks stand out as a reminder of feminism’s more grass-roots past and point to what the future could look like.

The marches are mostly organized by younger women who don’t apologize for their in-your-face tactics, making the events much more effective in garnering media attention and participant interest than the actions of well-established (and better funded) feminist organizations. And while not every feminist may agree with the messaging of SlutWalks, the protests have translated online enthusiasm into in-person action in a way that hasn’t been done before in feminism on this scale.

The protests began after a police officer told students at Toronto’s York University in January that if women want to avoid rape, they shouldn’t dress like “sluts.” (If you thought the days of “she was asking for it” were long gone, guess again.) Heather Jarvis, a student in Toronto and a co-founder of SlutWalk, explained that the officer’s comments struck her and her co-organizers as so preposterous and damaging that they demanded action. “We were fed up and pissed off, and we wanted to do something other than just be angry,” she said. Bucking the oft-repeated notion that young women are apathetic to feminism, they organized. What Jarvis hoped would be a march of at least 100 turned out to be a rally of more than 3,000 — some marchers with “slut” scrawled across their bodies, others with signs reading “My dress is not a yes” or “Slut pride.”

The idea that women’s clothing has some bearing on whether they will be raped is a dangerous myth feminists have tried to debunk for decades. Despite all the activism and research, however, the cultural misconception prevails. After an 11-year-old girl in Texas was gang-raped, the New York Times ran a widely criticized story this spring that included a description of how the girl dressed “older than her age” and wore makeup — as if either was relevant to the culpability of the 18 men accused of raping her. In Scotland, one secondary school is calling for uniforms to be baggier and longer in an attempt to dissuade pedophiles. When I speak on college campuses, students will often say they don’t believe that a woman’s attire makes it justifiable for someone to rape her, but — and there almost always is a “but” — shouldn’t women know better than to dress in a suggestive way?

What I try to explain to those students is part of what the SlutWalk protests are aiming to relay on a grander scale. That yes, some women dress in short, tight, “suggestive” clothing — maybe because it’s hot outside, maybe because it’s the style du jour or maybe just because they think they look sexy. And there’s nothing wrong with that. Women deserve to be safe from violent assault, no matter what they wear. And the sad fact is, a miniskirt is no more likely to provoke a rapist than a potato sack is to deter one.

As one Toronto SlutWalk sign put it: “Don’t tell us how to dress. Tell men not to rape.” It’s this — the proactive, fed-upness of SlutWalks — that makes me so hopeful for the future. Feminism is frequently on the defensive. When women’s activists fought the defunding of Planned Parenthood, for example, they didn’t rally around the idea that abortion is legal and should be funded. Instead, advocates assured the public that Planned Parenthood clinics [provide breast exams and cancer screenings](#). Those are crucial services, of course, but the message was far from the “free abortion on demand” rallying cry of the abortion rights movement’s early days.

Established organizations have good reason to do their work in a way that’s palatable to the mainstream. They need support on Capitol Hill and funding from foundations and donors. But a muted message will only get us so far. “We called ourselves something controversial,” Jarvis says. “Did we do it to get attention? Damn right we did!”

Nineteen year-old Miranda Mammen, who participated in SlutWalk at Stanford University, says the idea of “sluttiness” resonates with younger women in part because they are more likely than their older counterparts to be called sluts. “It’s also loud, angry, sexy in a way that going to a community activist meeting often isn’t,” she says.

Emily May, the 30-year-old executive director of Hollaback, an organization that battles street harassment, plans to participate in SlutWalk in New York City in August. “Nonprofit mainstays like conferences, funding and strategic planning are essential to maintaining change — but they don’t ignite change,” she says. “It’s easy to forget that change starts with anger, and that history has always been made by badassess.”

Unlike protests put on by mainstream national women’s organizations, which are carefully planned and fundraised for — even the signs are bulk-printed ahead of time — SlutWalks have cropped up organically, in city after city, fueled by the raw emotional and political energy of young women. And that’s the real reason SlutWalks have struck me as the future of feminism. Not because an entire generation of women will organize under the word “slut” or because these marches will completely eradicate the damaging tendency of law enforcement and the media to blame sexual assault victims (though I think they’ll certainly put a dent in it). But the success of SlutWalks does herald a new day in feminist organizing. One when women’s anger begins online but takes to the street, when a local step makes global waves and when one feminist action can spark debate, controversy and activism that will have lasting effects on the movement.

Established feminist groups have had tremendous success organizing feminist action in recent years. The 2004 [March for Women’s Lives](#) — put on by the National Organization for Women, NARAL Pro-Choice America, the Feminist Majority Foundation and others — brought out more than 1 million people protesting President George W. Bush’s anti-woman, anti-choice policies. It was an incredible event, but the momentum of the protest largely stopped when the march did.

It's too early to tell whether SlutWalks will draw people on that scale, but they are different in a key respect. Instead of young women being organized by established groups, SlutWalks have young women organizing themselves — something I believe makes these women more likely to stay involved once the protest is over. SlutWalks aren't a perfect form of activism. Some feminist critics think that by attempting to reclaim the word "slut," the organizers are turning a blind eye to the many women who don't want to salvage what they see as an irredeemable term. As Harsha Walia wrote at the Canadian site [Rabble](#): "I personally don't feel the whole 'reclaim slut' thing. I find that the term disproportionately impacts women of color and poor women to reinforce their status as inherently dirty and second-class."

Anti-pornography activist [Gail Dines argued](#), along with victims rights advocate Wendy Murphy, that the SlutWalk organizers are playing into patriarchal hands. They say the protesters "celebrating" the word "slut" and dressing in risqué clothing are embracing a pornified consumer sexuality. Frankly, I don't think any of these women will be posing for the "Girls Gone Wild" cameras anytime soon. Yes, some protesters have worn lingerie, but others have worn jeans and T-shirts. Organizers encourage marchers to wear whatever they want because the point is that no matter what women wear, they have a right not to be raped. And if someone were to attack them, they have a right not to be blamed for it.

In the past, clothing designed to generate controversy has served to emphasize the message that women have a right to feel safe and participate fully in society. Suffragists wore pants called "bloomers," named for the women's rights activist Amelia Bloomer. They were meant to be more practical than the confining dresses of the times. But, echoing the criticism of SlutWalk participants today, the media did not take kindly to women wearing pants. The November 1851 issue of *International Monthly* called the outfits "ridiculous and indecent," deriding the suffragists as "vulgar women whose inordinate love of notoriety is apt to display itself in ways that induce their exclusion from respectable society."

The SlutWalkers, in outfits that could be grumpily labeled "ridiculous and indecent," are not inducing exclusion from respectable society. They're generating excitement, translating their anger into action and trying to change our supposedly respectable society into one that truly respects men, women and yes, even "sluts."

Jessica Valenti, the founder of [Feministing.com](#), is the author of "[The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession With Virginity Is Hurting Young Women](#)" and the forthcoming "Why Have Kids?: The Truth About Parenting and Happiness."