



Slutwalks and the future of feminism

Opinion piece by [Katherine Sansom](#) June 2011

In January this year, addressing a group of students at a Toronto college, PC Michael Sanguinetti expressed the view that women “should avoid dressing like sluts in order to not be victimised”. [\(1\)](#)

In February, a man in Canada was found guilty of rape but sentenced to probation, with Justice Robert Dewar asserting that the victim’s ‘tube top and heels’ must have suggested to the rapist that she wanted sex. [\(2\)](#)

In March, Republican Florida State Representative Kathleen Passidomo stated that the gang rape of an 11-year-old girl by 18 men was the result of the child having been “dressed like a 21-year-old prostitute”. [\(3\)](#)

Outrage at the ‘victim blaming’ nature of these statements then spilled out of the usual feminist circles and into the mainstream, with 3,000 people protesting in Toronto for women’s right to express their sexuality “without opening ourselves to an expectation of violence”. Further

demonstrations have followed in the US, Australia and the UK, with more than 70 planned around the globe.

While the publicity generated by these protests has been helped in part by the press-friendly name ('Slutwalks') and the photogenic images of young women protesting in 'slutty' attire, the anger and frustration of the protesters is undoubtedly genuine and widespread.

And yet, the peculiarity of this outburst is that the central argument — that victims are never to blame for their own rapes — is entirely uncontroversial. Sanguinetti was forced to apologise, Dewar's decision overturned, and Passidomo widely vilified: indicating that their revolting assertions are not reflective of a patriarchal ruling order.



Instead, these comments — and the outrage they inspired — must be considered in a social context that has a deep unease with sex in general, and considers male sexuality innately destructive.

Sanguinetti prefaced his remark with,
“You know, I think we’re beating around the bush here...”
And he’s right: we are beating around the bush.

Where sex for women is thought to be a form of interaction; sex for a man is deemed the act of making use of another person’s body. If male sexuality is inherently bestial, a rapist is merely a man who has failed to restrain himself. And yet it is politically incorrect to take this to its logical conclusion, and instruct women to avoid provoking men unless they’re willing to face the consequences.

Krishnan Guru Murthy challenged the Slutwalks ethos by suggesting that a hypothetical 13-year-old girl “dressed in a sexual way” and walking in a “dodgy part of town” would be placing herself at risk of sexual violence. [\(4\)](#) And this image of depraved men hunting naïve, ‘sexualised’ girl children in ‘dodgy’ working-class areas is both a literal fear of many mainstream middle-class commentators, and also a neat metaphor for a commonly held view of all sexual interaction between men and women today.

Conservative MP Nadine Dorries argues that abstinence education for girls would give them the skills to fight off their boy classmates’ sexual advances. Linda Papadopoulos argues that the proliferation of sexually charged imagery has left boys seeing girls as no more than meat. And every anti-alcohol PSA asserts that getting drunk with the boys increases one’s chances of being raped by the boys.

While the barrage of threats and warnings and ‘helpful advice’ about the dangers and diseases and unwanted pregnancies associated with sex is certainly a wearying feature of most young people’s lives; the repeated assertion that rape exists on the spectrum of normal male sexuality is a visceral threat.

And this lurking threat of 'consequences' to the provoking of male desire exists alongside a popular model of female sexuality that promotes sexual availability, leading to confusion and tension and resentment. The sense of living under the constant threat of rape might be illusory, but it's certainly a forceful and vivid illusion.

And then a Sanguinetti or a Dewar speak out of turn, and tensions boil over. 'BECAUSE WE'VE HAD ENOUGH' is the name of the Slutwalks Toronto website, and that infuriated exasperation says it all.

But their exasperation has taken on the wrong target. We don't need further assertions of the potential for male violence, we need outrage at these base slanders of masculinity and human intimacy.

Women absolutely have the right to be sexual beings and express their sexuality 'without opening themselves up to an expectation of violence', and it is an entirely positive thing that this message has proven as uncontroversial as it has. But the same is equally true for men, and the widespread belief that the male sex drive is a brutal impulse that is either restrained or violent is one of the biggest obstacles to sexual liberalism that we currently face.

As this issue is clearly a complex one and appears to cause quite a lot of discussion in attempting to clarify what the demands are and represent, this is to be the subject of the [July Manchester Salon](#) .