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Violence against women: SlutWalking gets rolling after cop's loose talk about provocative clothing

Sunday 24 March 2013, by [PILKINGTON Ed](#) (Date first published: 6 May 2011).

Lecture to Toronto students ignites protests across Canada and US at culture of blaming rape victims.

Magdalena Ivasecko and Sierra Chevy Harris at the first Toronto SlutWalk, called after a police officer told a group of students that women should not dress like sluts if they want to avoid being sexually assaulted. Photograph: Richard Lautens/AP

When a police officer from Toronto went on a routine visit to Osgoode Hall Law School to advise the students on personal safety, little did he know that he would unwittingly inspire a movement that has caught fire across Canada and the US.

"You know, I think we're beating around the bush here," Michael Sanguinetti began, blandly enough, as he addressed the 10 students who turned up for the pep talk. Then he said: "I've been told I'm not supposed to say this - however, women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimised."

Fast forward three months from Sanguinetti's unfortunate remarks, and a movement that was born in riposte to his loose talk has now gone international. "SlutWalking" is attracting thousands of people to take to the streets to put an end to what they believe is a culture in which it is considered acceptable to blame the victim.

Some 2,351 people have signed up via Facebook to attend a SlutWalk through Boston on Saturday, when they will chant "Yes means yes, no means no," and "Hey hey, ho ho, patriarchy has to go."

Further SlutWalks are planned in the states of Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas, Utah, Washington and Wisconsin.

And that's before you get to Argentina, Australia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden and the UK.

Had it been under any other circumstance, Sanguinetti might have been quite proud of his global impact. In the circumstances, facing internal discipline by the Toronto police, he has grovelled profusely.

"I am embarrassed by the comment I made and it shall not be repeated," he said.

But there is no holding back the SlutWalkers now. Word spread like wildfire through Facebook and

Twitter, and anger about the comments began to coalesce around the idea of taking to the streets in protest. The SlutWalk was born. The first march was held in Toronto itself last month. Organisers had expected about 100 people to turn out, and were astonished when almost 3,000 people did so.

The participants, both female and male, carried placards saying "Met a slut today? Don't assault her," "Sluts pay taxes" and "We're here, we're sluts, get used to it."

Another sign at the rally read: "It was Christmas Day. I was 14 and raped in a stairwell wearing snowshoes and layers. Did I deserve it too?"

Some women attended the protest wearing jeans and T-shirts, while others took the mission of reclaiming the word "slut" – one of the stated objectives of the movement – more literally and turned out in overtly provocative fishnets and stilettos. But they were all united by the same belief: that rape is about the rapist, not his victim.

"We live in a society where rape isn't taken as seriously as it should be," said Katt Schott-Mancini, one of the organisers of the Boston SlutWalk.

"There's victim blaming: the idea that the victim of rape did something wrong. What you are wearing doesn't cause rape – the rapist causes it."

Schott-Mancini said she was herself a survivor of abuse by a former partner. "People belittled me, implying that it was my fault and that I shouldn't be an independent woman," she added.

The SlutWalks have particularly taken off among college students, given the location of the officer's remarks and the high prevalence of sexual violence on campus. The US government's Centres for Disease Control and Prevention found that up to one in four women in US universities report having experienced an attempted or completed rape while in college.

SlutWalk Toronto continues to be the organisational focal point. Its website www.slutwalktoronto.com – motto: "being a slut and getting pissed off" – proclaims that the word "slut" is being reappropriated.

"Whether a fellow slut or simply an ally, you don't have to wear your sexual proclivities on your sleeve: we just ask that you come. Singles, couples, parents, sisters, brothers, children, friends. Come walk or roll or strut or holler or stomp with us."

Ed Pilkington in New York

P.S.

* The Guardian, Friday 6 May 2011 19.15 BST:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/may/06/slutwalking-policeman-talk-clothing>