Breaking Down the SlutWalk Discourse

In January 2011, a campus safety information session was held at Osgoode Hall Law School in Toronto, Canada. York security and Toronto police officers attended the session and handed out safety tips to community members. During the session, a Toronto police officer commented that even though he has been told not to say something like this, women could avoid being raped if they didn't dress like "sluts". After the session, a public outcry occurred, asking for an apology from the officer as well as the police department, and SlutWalks were born. The first SlutWalk was held in Toronto, Canada, earlier this year. Since April, SlutWalk events have spread globally.

While the origins of SlutWalks were in direct response to a victim-blaming comment, these protests have developed into a call to action. The primary call to action has focused around the idea of publically reclaiming the word "slut." As SlutWalks have evolved, the messages seem to dig deeper into a public discourse to challenge the current social environment that reinforces rape myths while blaming victims in the process. A majority of the public as well as global discourse has remained on the fence as to whether or not to support SlutWalks.

At MNCASA we have not developed a position statement about the Slutwalk, but rather want to use the opportunity for the October 1 event in Minneapolis (www.slutwalkminneapolis.org) to prompt some good dialog about our movement to end sexual violence. At best sexual violence, intervention and prevention, is a complex topic with few easy answers. Here's how we see the competing perspectives:

Positive Results from SlutWalks	Opportunity for more Dialogue
Organizers have been very successful in using social media to mobilize large groups of people.	Current media coverage has sensationalized the term "slut" and has ignored the reality for many women and children.
The power of social media has successfully been used as a catalyst for much needed engagement and change.	Taking on the language of the oppressor does not apply the historical or cultural context of the term "slut".
This has provided a public format to empower victim/survivors.	Such walks may create a public format that is triggering or revictimizing for victim/survivors.
The walk provides a concrete example of the power and excitement behind engaged people choosing to be part of the solution.	This is an example of the ripple effect of the normalization of sexual harm and pornography has had on sexuality. Being sexually objectified is not an example of being sexy-it's being sexualized.

The organizers have been successful in engaging voices and activating a public discourse around issues of sexual violence.	The origins of these walks have left out the personal and political perspectives from women of color as well as gender across the spectrum.
In order to dismantle institutionalized power, privilege, and oppression, the movement needs people actively working both inside and outside of traditional systems.	Is this attention being done at the expense of women and children who are currently caught in the system of prostitution? How might they feel to see others parading as “sluts” while this may mirror their reality – likely not a choice.
The organizers have created a lot of very important attention and reaction to victim blaming in sexual assault cases.	Is reclaiming really effective? Do we want to reclaim “slut”?

There are no clear answers with such competing perspectives. Even though there are equal points for each side, it is impossible to measure the value of each perspective. Ultimately, the final decision will be on an individual basis. However, this does not mean as an agency or a collective voice within the anti-sexual violence movement; we cannot continue the dialogue. Consider using these points as you engage with your peers, local community, and media to further the discourse on the complexity of sexual violence as well as efforts to put an end to sexual violence.