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Publisher: Routledge

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Gender and Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cgee20>

Slut-shaming, girl power and 'sexualisation': thinking through the politics of the international SlutWalks with teen girls

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Available online: 04 May 2012

To cite this article: Jessica Ringrose & Emma Renold (2012): Slut-shaming, girl power and 'sexualisation': thinking through the politics of the international SlutWalks with teen girls, *Gender and Education*, 24:3, 333-343

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2011.645023>

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VIEWPOINT

Slut-shaming, girl power and ‘sexualisation’: thinking through the politics of the international SlutWalks with teen girls

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(Received 5 October 2011; final version received 31 October 2011)

This viewpoint begins by exploring whether the global phenomenon of the 2011 ‘SlutWalks’ constitutes a feminist politics of re-signification. We then look at some qualitative, focus group data with teen girls who participated in a UK SlutWalk. We suggest girls are not only negotiating a schizoid double pull towards performing knowing sexy ‘slut’ in postfeminist media contexts, but also managing de-sexualising protectionist discourses in school, particularly in relation to the highly regulatory moral panic over child ‘sexualisation’. We consider whether the SlutWalks are adult-centric and if teen girls’ involvement in a SlutWalk offered any critical rupturings to sexual regulation in their everyday lives.

Keywords: post-structural theory; femininities; domestic violence; girls; heteronormativity; violence; focus groups; secondary education

On 24 January 2011, a Canadian Police Officer Michael Sanguinetti offered a routine ‘personal safety’ visit at Osgoode Law School at York University in Toronto. Sanguinetti began his talk with the disclaimer, ‘You know, I think we’re beating around the bush here’. He went on to deliver the now infamous line ‘I’ve been told I’m not supposed to say this – however, women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimised’. In the wake of these comments, several outraged young women in attendance, in concert with the feminist faculty at York University, went on to publicise his objectifying, patriarchal and moralising comments, and organise the Toronto¹ ‘SlutWalk’. This local event has wider significances since it has now spread virally across major cities in Canada, the USA, Australia, Argentina, New Delhi, Sweden and many more.² What ended up being productive about Sanguinetti’s slut-blaming comments was the incredible international response that has emerged from this small, typically insignificant everyday moment. Indeed, the SlutWalk movement illustrates how a small group of determined women can generate awareness that has grown into a fully fledged international reaction and form of political resistance to a culture that considers it acceptable to blame the victims of sexual violence.

In this viewpoint, we want to think about how it is that in 2011 at a North American University campus, Sanguinetti felt his remarks would be unremarkable? What gender

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culture has he been immersed in that led him to believe this was a genuinely positive piece of advice for young women undergraduates about their personal safety? It would seem, despite the beliefs that women ‘have it all’ that ground gender equality mythologies, women are still subject to deeply sexist social and cultural values, or what some activist groups are defining as ‘rape culture’.

To begin, we think that what is needed is to unpack the logic that underpins Sanguinetti’s comments. Victim blaming is steeped in the cultural belief that women are the bearers of morality, and essentialised understandings that this morality is held within the female body (McClintock 1995). Drawing on an evolutionary fantasy about hard-wired male sexuality, is the idea that somehow an electromagnetic, biological (or affective) force will stir up crazed, uncontrollable hormonal sexual desire when in the company of women (Gavey 2005). Thus, we come to the juggernaut of sexual regulation over women’s bodies: when the female body is believed to be a tool of sorcery and seduction it is neither safe in the bikini where it is on full display or inside the burqa where it is fully veiled (Duits and van Zoonen 2006). Here, we also come to the focal point of why we think Sanguinetti’s remarks are relevant for a gender and education audience and in particular to a special issue on ‘sexualisation’.

SlutWalks as a politics of ‘re-signification’?

We consider the SlutWalks to be a significant form of feminist political action because they enliven what Butler (1997) has theorised as a politics of ‘re-signification’. Taking the word queer as the most common example of this dynamic, re-signification theorises how an injurious term is re-worked in the cultural domain from one of maligning to one of celebration. This dynamic is apparent in the use of slut as a point of celebration and a banner for political action, rather than shame (Attwood 2007). The SlutWalks as a collective movement are thus attempting to turn the blaming the victim of sexual violence for attack on its head! One of the goals is to push the gaze off the dress and behaviour of the victim of sexual violence back upon the perpetrator, questioning the normalisation and legitimisation of male sexual aggression.

To purposefully disrupt the normalising sexualising gaze upon the female body, the crowds at the SlutWalks dressed up in all manner of clothing. In London, a walk that Jessica participated in, this ranged from ‘sexy’ uniforms, to lingerie and nipple tassels as well as T-shirts, head scarves and boiler suits (see Figure 1). Large, hairy men donned bras and knickers. There were also an enormous range of placards and banners deconstructing discourses which blamed the victims of sexual violence for misogynist rape culture. These included, for instance: ‘slut isn’t an excuse for rape’, ‘it’s a dress not a yes’, ‘point the finger at the violent f**ker NOT the f**k me boots’ (see Figure 2), ‘stop staring at my push up bra and put that penis behind bars’, ‘my short skirt is not the problem’, ‘my vagina, my choice’, ‘Even if I dress like a hussy that doesn’t mean I want you near my pussy’, ‘This is not my “I want you” face’, ‘Stop thinking with your erection and attempt some self-reflection’. The sign ‘Hey Dorries I’m a slut and you’re one too’ (an ironic dig at the recent Dorrie ‘abstinence for girls’ education bill) was especially entertaining for those in the gender and education field! The slogans also tried to promote reciprocity and desire in sex, such as ‘consent is sexy’. Two young men were particularly savvy, having written ‘Love sex, hate rape’, and ‘respectful men are better in bed’ across their chests. Another guy had a ‘feminism back by popular demand’ sign strung round his neck. Was the postfeminist revulsion of feminism as dour, obsolete and repugnant (McRobbie 2008) being ‘rolled over’? Were



Figure 1. My body's nobody but mine.

the SlutWalks making feminism 'sexy' again? Was this a 'sexualisation' of feminism? What might this mean for young girls and young women? These types of questions were the focal point of the UK press coverage of the SlutWalks, where commentators debated whether the SlutWalks were a step forward or backwards, and whether it was possible to reclaim slut, with some arguing adamantly, no!³

In our analysis of the possibilities of the re-signification of slut, it is possible to interpret the assemblage of a 'SlutWalk' as creating a force of solidarity BETWEEN differently raced and classed, girls and women (and boys and men). In particular, by reclaiming 'slut' as a political category of unity (performing 'we are all sluts together'), it could also be refusing the destructive and projective force of 'slut shaming': that familiar form of sexual regulation that circulates between girls and women when they attack other women for dressing like 'sluts' and 'whores' to 'get male attention'. The SlutWalks also potentially challenge sexual rivalry between women. Often a thinly veiled attack at the attractive 'assets' of the girl or women in question, slut shaming is of course a deeply classed discourse, whereby associating 'sluts' with 'prostitutes' and 'whores' her sexual value is to be diminished and kept in check. It is a deeply divisive politics that we witnessed growing up and have seen re-enacted over and over again in our research encounters with girls in contemporary UK schools. Indeed this is a phenomena that has played a large part in the research literature on teen girls'



Figure 2. My vagina my choice.

sexual regulation from each other and from boys in their peer group in the international educational literature on girlhood and adolescence (Cowie and Lees 1981; Hey 1997; Kehily 2002; Tolman 2002; Ringrose 2008) and for young girls in primary schools (Thorne 1993; Renold 2002, 2005; Bhana 2005). Because we study and critique the developmental discourse of relational aggression between girls (Ringrose 2006), and the sexual regulation of femininity in tween and teen cultures (Ringrose and Renold 2010), this was perhaps the most poignant message of the SlutWalk for us; the refusal of slut as a signifier of shame, in particular, the attempt to explicitly transform it through mass political action.

Negotiating the 'slut' of school peer cultures versus the 'slut' in SlutWalks

In our respective and joint empirical work we have explored girls' negotiations of post-feminist 'sexualised' media cultures, where girls are supposed to be, 'knowing', 'sexy' and 'up for it' as well as 'innocent' (Renold and Ringrose 2011). We have also shown how girls' sexuality is ever more surveilled and regulated in an era where age-appropriate sexual behaviour is intensely scrutinised through international 'sexualisation' moral panics (Egan and Hawkes 2010). We have suggested that while 'sexualisation' as a policy discourse has usefully pointed to the problems of the hypersexualisation of girls bodies, the solutions it proffers are typically moralistic and call for a return to a middle class fantasy of girl innocence and virginity (Renold and Ringrose 2011). We have suggested we need to have great diligence in differentiating an anti-sexist feminist agenda around sexual liberation and female rights to sexual health and pleasure (Lerum

and Dworkin 2009) from right wing politics that urge for the reinstating of problematic gender politics and oppressive ideals of femininity.

Our micro-mappings of girls' explorations and experiments with 'slut subjectivities' have revealed complex negotiations and re-significations of 'slut' within local peer sexual cultures. Take the example of Natalia and Sadie, two 15-year-old girls in Jessica's research who used their social networking sites as a way to digitally take on the labels of 'slut' and 'whore', in response to the very slut shaming we have been describing. As Natalia said, when older girls bullied and 'insulted' them by calling them 'sluts' and 'slags' they decided to take on the label, 'She's my whore and I'm her slut. Whatever. Get over it'. What we have documented, however, is the very slippery and recuperative tendency around slut in the adolescent peer group. Depending on the stability of positioning within the popularity power dynamics of the group, slut can slip back easily into injury. So when Natalia's boyfriend broke up with her and started posting his 'luv' for a girl Daisy on his social networking profile, Natalia removed her slut user-name. It was no longer possible to comfortably wear this signifier. Slut had once again become too dangerous to 'try on'.

Given our experience with 'slut stories', including what we have called 'digital sluts' (see also Ringrose and Eriksson Barajas 2011), we were interested to pursue the potentiality of the SlutWalk as an example of mass political feminist action with a group of girls in our newest research project on 'girls, sexuality and sexualization'. In May 2011 on the back of a consultancy exploring a national charity's domestic violence programme in schools, we came across and then organically began a research project exploring a 'girl power' group established at one of the schools. The remit of the girl power group, which started with the girls in Year 8 (age 13), was to 'empower' girls who were noticeably disengaging from formal schooling. In the main, this group learned about local and global 'women's rights'. They engaged in a series of activities around sexual bullying, sexual relationship education, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender issues and domestic violence – all of which led to their involvement in national conferences and the delivery of some personal social health and economic education (PSHE) lessons (i.e. on healthy relationships) to younger students in their school. At our first group meeting with the girls they delivered a Power-Point of some of the content of one of these lessons which centred around respect and boundaries in romantic relationships. Through a discussion of global R&B pop icon Rihanna's injuries from ex-boyfriend Chris Brown, they argued that 'domestic abuse' was not a sign of love but one of power. Rihanna was discussed by the girls as an example of escaping from a violent domestic relationship.

During question time after the presentation, we began to try to dissect with the girls and the group leaders why the focus of the 'girl power' group was focused more on issues of teenage pregnancy, sexual assault and domestic violence. We also asked the group whether they had ever focused on the more positive aspects of girls' sexuality, including girls' own sexual desires. This received some awkward group silence, to which we also raised the issue of the 'SlutWalk' which was happening in their city in several weeks. Some of the girls responded positively and said they knew about the walks, but there was an uncomfortable silence, uneasy smiles and raised eyebrows from the two women teachers leading the group. Their trepidation was, of course, completely understandable in the context of schools, which operate as a space of hypersexual regulation and bastions of de-sexualising, heteronormative principles (Epstein, O'Flynn, and Telford 2003; Allen 2008). Pressing on, however, we were able to generate a fruitful discussion about the main impetus behind the

SlutWalks to fight back against male violence and blaming the victim discourses. While we knew that the teachers were incredibly supportive of the general message of the SlutWalk, they were simultaneously faced with the ongoing struggle of confronting the sexual regulation experienced by girls in a sanitised school space where ‘slut’ is a banished and punishable sexual swearword. Both teachers, however, did open up the space for discussion and we began to talk about if and how the girls could participate on the SlutWalk as part of their activism in the girl power group. Feeling their anxiety around negotiating the forbidden yet regulatory discourse of ‘slut’, the teachers responded in what has become a poignant and powerful moment of our research: ‘No, they probably can’t go, we’ll go on the march for them’.

The schizoid entanglement of sexual empowerment and sexual protection for the schoolgirl child

We left the school that day both intrigued and dismayed. We asked ourselves why is depicting violence against women tolerable, but thinking about resisting these dynamics through any recouping of sexual regulation over girls’ bodies largely undoable, if not unthinkable. What might be going on here? It occurred to us in relation to our prior work on the contradictory, indeed schizoid discourses of femininity (Renold and Ringrose 2008, 2011) that here, in the context of the school, the girls are placed as ambassadors of a pedagogy around female oppression, yet simultaneously held hostage to a discourse of sexual risk and protection (of themselves and others). Beyond the school gates, however, they are supposed to be empowered through new ‘technologies of sexy’ (Gill 2008; Evans, Riley, and Shankar 2010) like performing the knowing and savvy ‘slut’ that mediate contemporary femininity, put into action by teens like Natalia and Sadie.

Eager to assist the teachers and the girls who wanted to participate in the SlutWalk, Emma met with the organisers of the Cardiff SlutWalk to discuss how they could work together to better communicate to schools across Wales the key messages of the SlutWalk for younger students.⁴ These information packs and leaflets were distributed to the research school and went some way to assist some of the girls’ participation. Indeed, several of the girls went on the local SlutWalk, chaperoned by one of their mothers. Meanwhile the teachers, true to their word had gone to the march separately, although happy to be with the girls once there. Eager to pursue these dynamics further, we returned for another fieldwork trip to explore, in focus groups, the girls’ perceptions of how the teachers felt unable to bring the two spheres, of the public space of political marching and the institutional fortress of school-based pedagogisation, together. Here, are some of their reflections on trying to raise awareness of the SlutWalk in their school:

The teachers weren’t sure if we were allowed to say the word slut or slag or something, cos you know the SlutWalk?

It’s because of the parents of the children, the children might go back, tell their parents. Their parents could get in touch with the school saying that they don’t want their kids to learn about it when they actually should

...

Yeah they weren’t like willing to make it as a trip, sort of

She [the teacher] did go in the end

Yeah, she went but she was like, we can’t walk with you

It’s really annoying

It's really frustrating because it happens [discussing being called a 'slut'] and you need to deal with it, like straight on

Again like in PSE, sorry, in PSE we said like aw they shouldn't call girls names by what they wear and all the people were asking like, well what names do you mean and we were like, we said Miss Jones, can we say? And she was like, 'no'

Jessica: And they were like, what names?

...

Like slut, slag and that . . . we couldn't say them

Collectively, these reflections further stress the contradictory schizoid entanglement of protection versus empowerment and the limits of the political re-signification that 'slut' can bear in the context of their generational location as young teenagers, the sexual regulation of sanitised school cultures and the very same parental anxiety fuelling the key concerns of the Bailey Report (see Barker and Duschinsky 2012). In the context of the school, 'slut' is an unambiguous signifier and firmly located in the box of injurious insults. Indeed the irony of their struggle to even name 'slut' through fear of formal sanction, to either address sexualised name-calling in a PSHE lesson or participating on a SlutWalk was not lost on us, or the girls, or indeed the teachers.

'Fuck Rape': girls on the SlutWalk

Despite the paradoxes and problems outlined above, some of the girls' parents fully supported the march, and some girls persisted in gaining parental consent to participate. Feelings of excitement and pride at being in and belonging to a global movement that spoke to many of the issues the girls had been learning about and indeed experiencing in their everyday lives was strongly articulated as they talked about what it was like, not only to go on the SlutWalk but to go on their first feminist political rally:

It was really, it was quite exciting

I was really excited. And I got, we, we, what was my sign saying? We're humans not meat or something

Mmm, yeah

I was so proud, like, YES! Really proud

One (chant) was like, oh, what, what we, 'whatever we wear, wherever we go, yes means yes and no means no', that one

What was that banner?

What was that one sign that was really funny and we took a photo of it

Oh yeah, it was one

Like about, like

There was one that just like put it out there, like, 'Fuck Rape'

Yeah

(They all laugh)

I think that was my favourite one!

...

It's like, you know, they were saying like, sex is good, rape isn't, like, as in

Yeah

Yeah

...

No, no, no, 'Rape is bad, Sex is great'

Yeah that's it

...

I really enjoyed like, going on it and seeing like, and like, hearing the speeches as well at the end. Rhia's mum was really good.

Yeah and as well to, like, know that like, like we were like the only girls around our age, and like, I felt really proud

Yeah

EMMA: Did you?

I'm standing up for like, what I think's right and I feel like

Yeah, like standing up for our rights

Yeah, for like, yeah and I think it's really important

Many of the banner slogans and chants were strongly felt by the girls. Not only did they touch upon the blurry boundaries of pleasure and pain experienced in their own lives (we found out later) but being able to shout out 'Fuck Rape' was hugely liberating and powerful perhaps because they transgressed a whole range gendered, sexual and generational taboos (e.g. swearing out loud amongst adult peers) and politics (e.g. 'standing up' and 'fighting back' against the sexual regulation of the female body). However, while the public space of the SlutWalk enabled this action and these feelings, the adultification of the event and indeed the radicality of engaging in a local/global sexual politics was something that was unthinkable in the context of the school. Here, tight boundaries of sexual age appropriateness endured, as the girls discuss below;

EMMA: Can you imagine a teenage march?

No

No

No

I don't think anyone would like

Go

I don't, yeah, I don't think anyone would go

Some people might like the idea but, actually going

EMMA: Is it because there's not, there wouldn't be many kids there?

No, I just think it's general laziness

Plus parents might not let their kids go

(...)

I wish the school like, organised a trip and let us all go, cos I wish I went

That was never gonna happen

Their resounding 'no's' to Emma's suggestion of a teenage SlutWalk illustrates the radicality of the young teen girls involvement. The possibility of organising a school trip, was 'never gonna happen'. While many thought their peers 'might like the idea', they thought they would not 'actually go', because of their perceived political apathy and parental regulation/reprisals. And thus, once more, the luminosity of 'slut' as abject signifier drowns out the possibilities of organised resistance. Nevertheless, we were left with the feeling that some critical rupture, either in the embodied 'being there' or in the

fantasy for being there ('I wish I went', 'like the idea of it') enabled, what Deleuze and Guattari might call a 'line of flight' (Renold and Ringrose 2008).

Where are the boys?: beyond abject girls and absent boys

The absence of addressing boys' engagement with issues of women's equalities and rights, domestic violence or girls' experiences of (hetero)sexual harassment is well documented in other research and features strongly in our own research. In fact, we also worked with a boys' group at the school, which began subsequent to the girls' power group to assist 'disengaged' boys, and was indeed described as a response to a perceived sense of 'unfairness' that there was a girl's group but not a boys one at the school. Ironically, the group was called 'The Gentleman's Club' by the teachers. The postfeminist dynamics of 'what about the boys' in response to girl-focused interventions, often marked out as jeopardising or marginalising boys is a familiar one for the gender and educational audience (Epstein et al. 1998; Ringrose, in press). What is interesting to us is that while the boys' group began addressing similar gender issues implied by the tag of 'gentleman', including 'women's rights', it quickly morphed into an entirely different type of group that delivered PSHE lessons on drug and substance abuse (constructed as a largely boys' issue), but also went on paintball excursions. The boys re-named the group the 'Mad Boys' and regaled us of stories of the fun, adventure and trouble they got up to both in and outside of school. In group interviews whenever we raised issues related to 'healthy relationships' and sexuality education, they bracketed these issues (and particularly domestic abuse and violence) as almost owned by the girls, moving swiftly onto stories and photos of 'mad' play fights where they 'bashed each others heads in' or all night camping adventures.

Like other research that has documented similar findings, this shows the need for a relational approach to the ways in which sexual regulation and violence circulate across and between girls' and boys' cultures (Ringrose 2008; Keddie 2009). We, alongside many others, are trying to trouble the ongoing tendency to make girls responsible for their own and others' sexual safety, as idealised rational, sexual risk averters and pedagogues (Ringrose and Eriksson Barajas 2011). We have to continue challenging the re-victimisation and re-shaming of young sexual girlhood and the ways in which the girl body returns again and again as the focal point of a patriarchal, moralising gaze and frequently as the only site of intervention for change. Furthermore, we argue this dynamic ends up making feminine sexual desires an invisible, discursive silence in school and beyond.

Concluding thoughts

In this viewpoint we have begun to trace the ripples of pleasure, excitement, ambivalence, confusion and pain in the 'slut' stories of our young participants. We are trying to make sense of the shifting sexual body politics of young femininities, masculinities and sexualities. As Attwood (2007, 244) argued in her incisive mapping of the shifting meanings of the term 'slut' over time

whether our focus is the way "slut" is used to police women's behaviour, the significance of sluttiness in popular culture, or its appropriation in mainstream and subcultural practices, an understanding of the ways it might unite or divide us as women and feminists is crucial.

Since Atwood's writing, the mobilising power of 'slut' has been spectacularly borne out through the recent international SlutWalks. But what we have been illustrating through our discussion is how the re-signifying potential of slut has specific age-bound dynamics. It is also cut through by race and class with different sets of risks for different girls as they transition into sexual 'development' and young womanhood. While some girls may 'try on' slut as part of the pleasures and pain of participating in their peer sexual cultures, it remains a tricky, slippery site of potential injury and sexual regulation. Girls also seem to be prohibited from taking it on and addressing it through the formal curriculum at school, which throw up the paradox of protectionist and empowerment agendas. This underscores the same dynamics of contention in the adult debates over the political significance and possibility of the SlutWalks, which asked if it was possible to reclaim 'slut'. What we have shown here, however, is that these questions are even more pertinent yet potentially difficult to grapple with when we are working with teen girls and indeed, with teen boys.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the students and teachers at the research school for sharing their thoughts and experiences with us.

Notes

1. The site of this exchange is particularly significant to Jessica as she completed her MA and PhD at York University in the Department of Sociology and Women's Studies.
2. There have been SlutWalks in Toronto, Vancouver, New York, Boston, Dallas, Montreal, Sydney, Buenos Aires, New Delhi, London, Cardiff, Newcastle, Manchester, Glasgow, Edinburgh and Gallaway. Further Slutwalks have happened or are planned in the US states of Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas, Utah, Washington and Wisconsin; and in the countries of Argentina, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Sweden, Singapore and Malaysia.
3. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/may/15/slutwalk-debate-sexual-discrimination>; <http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/standard/article-23948121-should-feminists-be-embracing-the-world-slut.do>.
4. Following this meeting, Emma was invited to address the Cardiff Slutwalk march and raised the issue of how the gendered and sexual regulation of bodies, identities and cultures also featured strongly in young children's lives. See <http://www.youngsexualities.org/> for a video of the Cardiff Slutwalk speeches.

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