

An Open Letter from Black Women to the SlutWalk September 23, 2011

We the undersigned women of African descent and anti-violence advocates, activists, scholars, organizational and spiritual leaders wish to address the SlutWalk. First, we commend the organizers on their bold and vast mobilization to end the shaming and blaming of sexual assault victims for violence committed against them by other members of society. We are proud to be living in this moment in time where girls and boys have the opportunity to witness the acts of extraordinary women resisting oppression and challenging the myths that feed rape culture everywhere.

The police officer's comments in Toronto that ignited the organizing of the first SlutWalk and served to trivialize, omit and dismiss women's continuous experiences of sexual exploitation, assault, and oppression are an attack upon our collective spirits. Whether the dismissal of rape and other violations of a woman's body be driven by her mode of dress, line of work, level of intoxication, her class, and in cases of Black and brown bodies—her race, we are in full agreement that no one deserves to be raped.

The Issue At Hand

We are deeply concerned. As Black women and girls we find no space in SlutWalk, no space for participation and to unequivocally denounce rape and sexual assault as we have experienced it. We are perplexed by the use of the term "slut" and by any implication that this word, much like the word "Ho" or the "N" word should be re-appropriated. The way in which we are perceived and what happens to us before, during and after sexual assault crosses the boundaries of our mode of dress. Much of this is tied to our particular history. In the United States, where slavery constructed Black female sexualities, Jim Crow kidnappings, rape and lynchings, gender misrepresentations, and more recently, where the Black female immigrant struggle combine, "slut" has different associations for Black women. We do not recognize ourselves nor do we see our lived experiences reflected within SlutWalk and especially not in its brand and its label.

As Black women, we do not have the privilege or the space to call ourselves "slut" without validating the already historically entrenched ideology and recurring messages about what and who the Black woman is. We don't have the privilege to play on destructive representations burned in our collective minds, on our bodies and souls for generations. Although we understand the valid impetus behind the use of the word "slut" as language to frame and brand an anti-rape movement, we are gravely concerned. For us the trivialization of rape and the absence of justice are viciously intertwined with narratives of sexual surveillance, legal access and availability to our personhood. It is tied to institutionalized ideology about our bodies as sexualized objects of property, as spectacles of sexuality and deviant sexual desire. It is tied to notions about our clothed or unclothed bodies as unable to be raped whether on the auction

block, in the fields or on living room television screens. The perception and wholesale acceptance of speculations about what the Black woman wants, what she needs and what she deserves has truly, long crossed the boundaries of her mode of dress.

We know the SlutWalk is a call to action and we have heard you. Yet we struggle with the decision to answer this call by joining with or supporting something that even in name exemplifies the ways in which mainstream women's movements have repeatedly excluded Black women even in spaces where our participation is most critical. We are still struggling with the how, why and when and ask at what impasse should the SlutWalk have included substantial representation of Black women in the building and branding of this U.S. based movement to challenge rape culture?

Black women in the U.S. have worked tirelessly since the 19th century colored women's clubs to rid society of the sexist/racist vernacular of slut, jezebel, hottentot, mammy, mule, sapphire; to build our sense of selves and redefine what women who look like us represent. Although we vehemently support a woman's right to wear whatever she wants anytime, anywhere, within the context of a "SlutWalk" we don't have the privilege to walk through the streets of New York City, Detroit, D.C., Atlanta, Chicago, Miami, L.A. etc., either half-naked or fully clothed self-identifying as "sluts" and think that this will make women safer in our communities an hour later, a month later, or a year later. Moreover, we are careful not to set a precedent for our young girls by giving them the message that we can self-identify as "sluts" when we're still working to annihilate the word "ho", which deriving from the word "hooker" or "whore", as in "Jezebel whore" was meant to dehumanize. Lastly, we do not want to encourage our young men, our Black fathers, sons and brothers to reinforce Black women's identities as "sluts" by normalizing the term on t-shirts, buttons, flyers and pamphlets.

The personal is political. For us, the problem of trivialized rape and the absence of justice are intertwined with race, gender, sexuality, poverty, immigration and community. As Black women in America, we are careful not to forget this or we may compromise more than we are able to recover. Even if only in name, we cannot afford to label ourselves, to claim identity, to chant dehumanizing rhetoric against ourselves in any movement. We can learn from successful movements like the Civil Rights movement, from Women's Suffrage, the Black Nationalist and Black Feminist movements that we can make change without resorting to the taking-back of words that were never ours to begin with, but in fact heaved upon us in a process of dehumanization and devaluation.

What We Ask

Sisters from Toronto, rape and sexual assault is a radical weapon of oppression and we are in full agreement that it requires radical people and radical strategies to counter it. In that spirit, and because there is so much work to be done and great potential to do it together, we ask that

the SlutWalk be even more radical and break from what has historically been the erasure of Black women and their particular needs, their struggles as well as their potential and contributions to feminist movements and all other movements.

Women in the United States are racially and ethnically diverse. Every tactic to gain civil and human rights must not only consult and consider women of color, but it must equally center all our experiences and our communities in the construction, launching, delivery and sustainment of that movement.

We ask that SlutWalk take critical steps to become cognizant of the histories of people of color and engage women of color in ways that respect culture, language and context.

We ask that SlutWalk consider engaging in a re-branding and re-labeling process and believe that given the current popularity of the Walk, its thousands of followers will not abandon the movement simply because it has changed its label.

We ask that the organizers participating in the SlutWalk take further action to end the trivialization of rape at every level of society. Take action to end the use of the word "rape" as if it were a metaphor and also take action to end the use of language invented to perpetuate racist/sexist structures and intended to dehumanize and devalue.

In the spirit of building a revolutionary movement to end sexual assault, end rape myths and end rape culture, we ask that SlutWalk move forward in true authenticity and solidarity to organize beyond the marches and demonstrations as SlutWalk. Develop a more critical, a more strategic and sustainable plan for bringing women together to demand countries, communities, families and individuals uphold each other's human right to bodily integrity and collectively speak a resounding NO to violence against women.

We would welcome a meeting with the organizers of SlutWalk to discuss the intrinsic potential in its global reach and the sheer number of followers it has energized. We'd welcome the opportunity to engage in critical conversation with the organizers of SlutWalk about strategies for remaining accountable to the thousands of women and men, marchers it left behind in Brazil, in New Delhi, South Korea and elsewhere—marchers who continue to need safety and resources, marchers who went back home to their communities and their lives. We would welcome a conversation about the work ahead and how this can be done together with groups across various boundaries, to end sexual assault beyond the marches.

As women of color standing at the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, class and more, we will continue to be relentless in the struggle to dismantle the unacceptable systems of oppression that designedly besiege our everyday lives. We will continue to fight for the development of policies and initiatives that prioritize the primary prevention of sexual assault, respect women and individual rights, agency and freedoms and holds offenders accountable.

We will consistently demand justice whether under governmental law, at community levels, or via community strategies for those who have been assaulted; and organize to end sexual assaults of persons from all walks of life, all genders, all sexualities, all races, all ethnicity, all histories.

Signed by: The Board of Directors and Board of Advisors, Black Women's Blueprint | Farah Tanis, Co-Founder, Executive Director, Black Women's Blueprint | **Endorsed by:** Toni M. Bond Leonard, President/CEO of Black Women for Reproductive Justice (BWRJ), Chicago, Illinois | Kelli Dorsey, Executive Director, Different Avenues, Washington, D.C. | S. Mandisa Moore | The Women's Health and Justice Initiative, New Orleans, Louisiana | Black and Proud, Baton Rouge, Louisiana | Civil Liberties and Public Policy Program at Hampshire College, Amherst, Massachusetts | Population and Development Program, Amherst, Massachusetts | Zeinab Eyega, New York, New York | Black Women's Network, Los Angeles, California | League of Black Women, Chicago, Illinois | African American Institute on Domestic Violence, Minneapolis, Minnesota | Brooklyn Young Mother's Collective, Brooklyn, New York | Women's HIV Collaborative, New York, New York | National Organization of Sisters of Color Ending Sexual Assault (SCESA), Connecticut | Girls for Gender Equity, Brooklyn, New York | My Sister's Keeper, Brooklyn, New York | The Mothers Agenda New York (the M.A.N.Y.), Brooklyn, New York | Sojourners Group For Women, Salt Lake City, Utah | Dr. Andreana Clay, Queer Black Feminist Blog, Oakland, California | Dr. Ida E. Jones, Historian, Author, *The Heart of the Race Problem: The Life of Kelly Miller* | Willi Coleman, Professor of Women's History, member of the Association of Black Women Historians, Laura Rahman, Director, *Broken Social Contracts*, Atlanta, Georgia | Marlene McCurtis, Director, *Wednesdays in Mississippi* Film Project | Issa Rae, Producer, Director, Writer, *Awkward Black Girl*, Los Angeles, California | *The Prison Birth Project* | Ebony Noelle Golden, Creative Director, *Betty's Daughter* Arts Collaborative & *The RingShout* for Reproductive Justice | Yvonne Moore, Southern California, Sexual Assault Survivor | Kola Boo, Novelist, Poet, Womanist | Jessicah A. Murrell, Spelman College C'11, Candidate for M.A. Women's Studies | Shanika Thomas | Cathy Gillespie | Kristin Simpson, Brooklyn, New York | Mkali-Hashiki, Certified Sexological Bodyworker, Certified Sound, Voice, & Music Healing Practitioner, Owner & Operator of *Body Enstasy*, Erotic Wellness Facilitation | Linda Mizell, Ed.D., Assistant Professor School of Education, University of Colorado at Boulder | Sherley Accime, President, C.E.O. ANEW, NY, *SeaElle* Integrated Therapies | Diedre F. Houchen, M.A. Ed., Alumni Doctoral Fellow, Black Education, University of Florida | Hanalei Ramos, Co-founder, Filipinas for Rights and Empowerment, NYC |