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## Exploring the Complexities of Men as Allies in Feminist Movements

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### Abstract

As the numbers of men involved with feminist activism continues to grow, exploring the dynamics of power and privilege within the feminist movement warrants increased attention. Eight self-identified women feminists shared their experiences working with men as allies in the feminist movement, highlighting the need for a balance between challenge and support for men striving to be allies. Implications and recommendations for practice are also provided.

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In January 2014, President Obama initiated the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault. This Task Force has been charged with providing “educational institutions best practices for preventing and responding to rape and sexual assault” (WHCWG, 2014, p. 5). A report from the White House Council on Women and Girls (WHCWG) highlights “working with men to change social norms” as a strategy to prevent sexual violence on college campuses (The White Council on Women and Girls, 2014, p. 27), indicating the likelihood of an increase in support for programs designed to engage men as bystanders in sexual violence prevention. Bystander intervention programs, which emerged in the 1990s, target men as allies in addressing sexual violence. Although these programs show promise in terms of shifting men’s understanding of rape supportive culture, the programs have not yet affected the overall rates of sexual violence (Barone, Wolgemuth, & Linder, 2007; Foubert, Godin, & Tatum, 2010). Further, without conscientious attention to the complexities of men’s programs, these programs may cause additional harm in the violence prevention movement by reinforcing patriarchal and chivalrous notions of women’s need for protection (Bridges, 2010; Flood, 2002; Katz, 2006).

Working with men to deconstruct sexism without re-creating systems of oppression proves challenging as indicated by the experiences of the participants in this study. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the complexities of working with men as allies in feminist movements, including bystander intervention programs. Specifically, we intend to shed light on the ways in which sexism and other forms of oppression influence well-intentioned programs designed to interrupt sexism and violence. By illuminating these challenges, we hope practitioners and scholars engaged in allied work will be better equipped to consider and address dynamics of power and privilege in feminist spaces. Through interviews with women feminists working with men in feminist movements, we illuminate the ways patriarchy even influences the interactions of people striving to dismantle sexist oppression. Grounded in critical feminist epistemology (Alcoff & Potter, 1993), we seek to provide a counter-narrative (Delgado, 1989) to the master narrative of uncritically engaging men in bystander intervention work.

Although we recognize the limitations of gender binaries, in this study, we chose to explore the unique dynamics between feminists who identify as men and feminists who identify as women. Participants and their allies may have identified as any gender throughout their lives, but for the purposes of this study, we are focusing on the relationships between people who perceive each other as “men” and as “women.”

First, we set a context for this study by exploring the complexity of men’s roles in feminist movements through a framework of *enlightened sexism*. We also describe the concepts of accountability and allied behavior. Next, we describe the feminist epistemology and methodology employed in this study. Finally, we highlight the voices of women engaged with men as allies in sexual violence prevention, and provide recommendations for scholars and educators to consider when designing men’s programs.

### **Complexities of Men’s Roles in Feminism**

Many feminists, policy makers, and activists advocate for the inclusion of men in movements to end sexual violence (Flood, 2011; WHCWG, 2014). The philosophy behind bystander intervention programs targeting men highlights the fact that although men commit the vast majority of sexual assaults, most men do not perpetrate sexual assaults and often have power to influence other men (Berkowitz, 2004; Fabiano, Perkins, Berkowitz, Linkenbach, & Stark, 2003; Gidycz, Orchowski, & Berkowitz, 2011). The master narrative related to bystander intervention programs often frames them as a panacea to sexual violence prevention. Bystander intervention programs are seldom problematized for their perpetuation of sexist gender roles and uncritical praise and acceptance for men who identify themselves as feminist allies (Casey & Smith, 2010). A deeper analysis of bystander intervention programs targeting men and the roles of men in feminism more broadly illuminates some of the challenges associated with uncritically engaging men as allies. *Enlightened sexism* provides an important framework for exploring the complexities of the roles of men in feminism (Armato, 2013).

## **Enlightened Sexism**

Enlightened sexism refers to the notion that men with a feminist academic background and training may be incredibly dangerous as “allies” because they have the language and ability to describe problematic behavior, yet they may be perpetuating sexism through their own behaviors and failing to interrupt sexist behavior perpetuated by other men (Armato, 2013). To illustrate this framework, Armato (2013) shared his experience at an academic conference where he served as a discussant for a session with three papers about hegemonic masculinity, two presented by male-identified people and one by a female-identified person. He observed reconstruction of hegemonic masculinity in a space where authors were attempting to dismantle it. Further, Armato (2013) explores the racist and classist nature of academic men separating themselves from others “out there,” highlighting that it is a “common strategy for relatively privileged men to point out the problematic behavior of relatively marginalized men in the service of our own privilege” (p. 589). This separation does little to address systemic sexism in academia and other settings; rather, it serves to amplify the benefits “good guys” receive from minimal work or participation in dismantling sexist structures and behaviors (Armato, 2013, p. 5).

Enlightened sexism may also result in microaggressions perpetuated by “well-intentioned” men. Microaggressions include the everyday, subtle ways in which people experience hostility and discrimination, whether intentional or unintentional, based upon their marginalized identities (Sue, 2010). Examples of sexist microaggressions include women being cut off or talked over in meetings, assertive women being stereotyped as “bitchy,” and expectations that women subscribe to traditional gender roles (including being married by a certain age or participating in traditional feminine beauty rituals). Though each incident on its own may seem small, they occur frequently and the cumulative impact has a much larger than any one isolated event (Sue, 2010).

A popular event on many college campuses, *Walk a Mile in Her Shoes*, illustrates an example of a program that does little to dismantle sexism, but rewards men for participation. Touted as opportunities for men to “get involved” with the anti-violence movement by walking a mile in high-heeled shoes to raise awareness about sexual violence (Bridges, 2010, p. 11), these programs further perpetuate the “good guy” feminist identity. Although the purpose is to raise awareness about violence against women, the walks often turn into opportunities for transphobic (perpetuation of fear and violence directed at people who transgress gender binaries) and sexist behavior on the part of the people participating in and observing the walks. They do little in terms of raising awareness about violence against women, and allow “allies” to get a lot of praise for very little work or personal change (Bridges, 2010).

Most academic writing critiquing men’s participation in feminist movements has been written by self-identified White men, and been accepted by nationally reputable journals and book publishers (Armato, 2013; Bridges, 2010; Katz, 2006). Critiques written by women-identified people are mostly featured in newspapers, blogs, and some conference presentations (Holman, 2013; Hong, 2006; Kendall, 2013). We have submitted this manuscript to various publication outlets and received feedback ranging from hostile to sexist-coded language, including comments like “currently, the literature review, especially the first few paragraphs, read too much like a personal agenda than a critical view or presentation of literature.” This amplifies the importance of sharing women’s voices as part of the conversation problematizing men’s roles in feminist and anti-violence movements, and providing a counter-narrative to the uncritical acceptance of men’s roles in this movement (Casey & Smith, 2010). Despite the challenges associated with engaging men as allies in feminist and anti-violence movements, we believe the work is necessary and can be accomplished through increased attention to the complexities of accountability and allied behavior.

## **Accountability and Allied Behavior**

Allied work is complex. Unintended consequences of behaviors associated with dominant identities can result in harm to individual people, and severed or strained relationships between people striving to engage in allied behavior and those in subordinated groups. The term “ally” means different things to different people: some claim it is a verb, indicating behavior dedicated to eradicating systems of oppression, while others use it as a noun, a term to identify someone who attempts to eradicate systems of oppression (McKenzie, 2014). Activists in social justice communities frequently discuss the complexities of allied work in blogs (e. g. Black Girl Dangerous, <http://www.blackgirldangerous.org/>) and videos (<http://www.franchesca.net/>) highlighting the need for accountability between allies and members of groups they attempt to ally with.

The concept of accountability challenges scholars and activists in many social justice movements and warrants significant attention (Funk, 2008; Kendall, 2006; Kivel, 2000). Accountability refers to the idea of ensuring people with privileged identities regularly engage with those experiencing oppression to ensure their ally actions match the needs and desires of a marginalized population (Edwards, 2006; Funk, 2008; Kendall, 2006). One way to frame accountability is to ask the question, “Who benefits from my work?” (Kivel, 2000, p. 1). Specific to men’s role in anti-violence work, Funk (2008) proposes several questions to guide accountability: “How do we keep the voices of women survivors in the work we do?” and “What does respecting women’s leadership mean to you and how do you do it?” Further, he prompts men to consider “What does respecting women’s leadership really look like? How do men do it? What are the models that men have of other men truly respecting women’s leadership?” (Funk, 2008, p. 166).

Similarly, Edwards’ (2006) model for aspiring social justice ally identity development includes three types of allies for social justice: aspiring ally for self-interest, aspiring ally for altruism, and ally for social justice. Aspiring allies for self-interest generally see themselves as a

“protector” (Edwards, 2006, p. 46) and feel motivated by a individual connection to a person, rather than a connection to a group or an issue. Aspiring allies for altruism often feel guilt for the privileges associated with their identities, which becomes a primary motivator for the work. Aspiring allies for altruism do work for other people, seeing their role as one of a hero or rescuer, which can be particularly problematic for men striving to engage in anti-violence efforts because it sets up the very dynamic the movement attempts to dismantle. As allies continue to explore their privilege, they move toward an understanding of ways they also experience harm as a result of oppression, and work *with*, rather than *for*, people in the targeted group. Allies for social justice understand the role they play in perpetuating oppression and see themselves as allies to an issue rather than an individual (Edwards, 2006).

Individuals have different expectations of allies, and some women-identified feminists have written about their expectations of men as allies (Hong, 2006; hooks, 1984). Requests for accountability of men as allies include: 1) listening to women and valuing their experiences and knowledge; 2) exploring male privilege – understand ways men gain privilege individually and structurally; 3) seeking help for the ways they previously treated women; 4) challenging other men; 5) behaving the same privately as they do publically; 6) working to ensure cultural responsiveness in all anti-oppression work; 7) taking feminist needs to mainstream organizations; 8) tracking the number of times and length men and White people speak in mixed-gendered or racial groups; 9) tracking who gets to make decisions; and 10) asking women for guidance, without putting the burden completely on women to guide their ally work (Crass, 2008; Fuller & Fisher, 1997; Kahn & Ferguson, 2010; Katz, 2006; Messner, 1997; Schacht & Ewing, 1997). Our participants’ perspectives support these types of accountability requests.

### **Methodology and Methods**

In this study, we use epistemology to refer to the philosophy informing the construction of knowledge and methodology to refer to the strategy used to conduct the research (Merriam,

2009). We employed feminist epistemology (Alcoff & Potter, 1993) and phenomenological methodology study (Merriam, 2009) to explore the gendered experiences of women feminists working with men in anti-violence movements. Feminist epistemology critiques the way power relationships influence the construction of knowledge, and centers the voices of historically marginalized groups, including women and people of Color. Although the term feminist may imply to some readers that the primary category of analysis is gender, feminist epistemologists argue that “gender can never be observed as a ‘pure’ or solitary influence” (Alcoff & Potter, 1993, p. 3). As illustrated through the enlightened sexism framework, the master (academic) narrative about the role of men in feminist movements has centered White men’s voices and perspectives, largely ignoring the negative experiences of women (both White and of Color) as partners in feminist movements. In this study, we sought to illuminate the experiences of women-identified feminists working with men striving to be allies. We engaged a phenomenology as the methodology because it focuses on better understanding a shared experience, or phenomenon, among participants (Merriam, 2009). The experiences and recommendations shared here shed light on the complexity of allied behavior and provide insight to those striving to be allies to address social injustice. The research question for this study was: What are the experiences of women working with men in feminist and anti-violence movements, and what recommendations do these women have for eradicating sexism within feminism?

Because the research is qualitative in nature, it is intended to be transferable rather than generalizable (Mertens, 2010). While the participants’ experiences do not represent every woman engaged with men aspiring to be allies, their stories do represent a breadth of experiences and we provide context through thick, rich description so the reader can glean insight and perspective from the voices of the participants (Lincoln, 2001). To provide a context in which the study took place, we highlight our researcher perspectives, information about the



participants of this study, and details related to the interview process. Additionally, we describe the data analysis process, including the criteria for rigor used in this study.

### **Researcher Perspectives**

Both authors came to this topic based on their own experiences engaging with men as allies in the feminist movement. The first author, Chris served as the director of a women's center for six years where she initiated a program focused on engaging men as allies to end violence against women. Three years after the men's program began, two women students shared instances of participants in the men's program sexually assaulting them. Chris carries these survivors' stories in her work in exploring the experiences of engaging men as allies in feminist movements. Similar to many of the participants in this study, Chris identifies as a White, educated, mixed social class, cisgender queer woman, and also brings those perspectives to her work.

Rachael had been an undergraduate student in the Women's Studies program at [institution] for two years when she was sexually assaulted by one of the men in the men's program Chris initiated. She disclosed this to Chris and other advocates at the university women's center. As part of her healing process, she decided to talk to other women about their experiences with men as allies for her women's studies capstone project. Rachael later worked with Chris to turn her capstone project into this research study. Rachael identifies as an educated, mixed social class, cisgender queer woman and is of mixed indigenous and White descent.

### **Data Collection**

To recruit participants, we sent emails to two national listservs for people working in sexual assault prevention and campus-based women's centers; between both listservs, we estimate that approximately 400 people saw the request for participants. We requested to speak with "people who identify as women about their interactions with men in feminist movements." We selected all of the participants who responded to engage in the study.

Participants included eight women with a range of experience working with men in feminist movements. Four of the women worked at women's centers on college campuses, including two private and two public institutions. Two of the women were employed as prevention and education coordinators for statewide sexual assault coalitions. The final two participants were PhD students who worked with men through activism rather than paid positions. Of these eight women, six identified as white, one as Latina, and one as a mixed race woman of Color. Six of the women stated their sexual orientation as queer, bisexual, or lesbian, while two identified as heterosexual. One woman identified as being low-income, three as middle-class, and four did not specify their socioeconomic status. All eight women have been formally educated with most possessing advanced degrees.

Each participant engaged in a 45- to 90-minute interview with one of the researchers conducting this study. Sample interview prompts included: Talk about your experiences doing work with self-identified feminist/pro-feminist men. What are the challenges and benefits associated with working with men in this movement? How have you seen your own intersecting identities, such as race, sexual orientation, and class, as well as those of the men you've worked with, playing out in your experiences? What is your understanding of accountability? How do you work to address accountability with men?

While it is important to share participants' stories in their own words and as fully as possible, we have been intentionally vague about identifying information in order to protect the participants' identities and safety. Some participants voiced concerns about the repercussions of speaking out about their experiences. Participants chose their own pseudonyms, and were given the opportunity to review what we had written before submission to ensure confidentiality.

### **Data Analysis**

We, the researchers, transcribed each interview and reviewed all of the transcripts individually. Using a three-cycle coding process (Saldaña, 2009), we initially coded for words, phrases, and ideas pertaining to the research question. Consistent with feminist epistemology,

we specifically noted participants' experiences with sexism and additional forms of oppression, highlighting ways in which power and privilege influenced their experiences. During the second cycle of coding, we grouped the initial ideas into similar categories, writing memos describing each of the categories we developed individually. Finally, for the third cycle of coding, we came together and grouped the categories into three over-arching themes highlighting the experiences of the participants of this study (Saldaña, 2009).

To ensure rigor in this study, we employed trustworthiness criteria of confirmability, transferability, and credibility (Lincoln, 2001). By engaging the participants in the process of member-checking and review, we met the criteria of credibility. No participants had any recommendations for changes to the summary of themes. We sought feedback from two scholars on college men's experiences. Their feedback enhanced the literature review and interpretation of the findings by including more attention to student affairs-related scholarship. This serves as a peer review process to satisfy the confirmability criterion (Merriam, 2009). Further, by providing researcher perspectives and writing the findings using the participants' words and language, we provide the reader with context and thick rich description, meeting the transferability criterion (Lincoln, 2001).

### **Findings and Themes**

In this section, we provide a counter-narrative to the master narrative to challenge the uncritical acceptance of men as allies in feminist movements and anti-violence prevention work. Although our participants did highlight benefits of working with men consistent with the current scholarship about men's role in feminism, they also courageously shared their negative experiences working with self-identified pro-feminist men. We briefly share the participants' perspectives about the benefits of working with men as allies, then we move to exploring the complexities of identity politics in feminist work and the challenges associated with working with men in feminist and anti-violence movements. We conclude this section with participants'

recommendations for addressing the challenges associated with working with men as feminist allies.

### **Benefits of Working with Men as Allies**

Consistent with previous scholarship, participants overwhelmingly highlighted the importance of men's assistance in facilitating workshops and programs about sexism and interpersonal violence. Participants believed other men hear men as allies differently than they do women because of systemic patriarchy (Berkowitz, 2004), and the audience often responds to them more positively than they do to women facilitators. One participant mentioned that faculty repeatedly request men as facilitators, ensuring that awareness related to sexual assault is included in their coursework semester after semester. It is important to acknowledge that though this can be a benefit, it is also problematic when men receive more credibility and praise for doing the same work that women do, and can also reinforce men's dominance.

Many participants also discussed that through their work with men as allies, they better understand their own role as allies in their privileged identities. Katrina presents this commitment to self-reflection:

I am trying to cultivate those feelings around working with bystanders and allies because I, too, am an ally to different communities and if I want somebody to take the time to support me in my pathetic attempts to become more aware then I need to offer that to other people as well.

Some women made the connection between their ally status with various identity groups and men as allies to them. Through this realization, women felt more compassion for well-intentioned men who make mistakes. Related to this, the feminists in this study also discussed the complexities of social identities in feminist work at length in their interviews.

### **Complexities of Identities**

Exploring the complexities of social identities and power and privilege leads to a more nuanced understanding of issues of accountability. Social identities influence interactions

between individuals, both consciously and unconsciously (Johnson, 2006). Many of the women in this study described identity as complex and fluid, contributing to their awareness of influence of identities when working with male-identified feminist allies. Linda described this consciousness:

I'm definitely conscious of the fact that in all of these relationships there are multiple power dynamics operating. There's gender, there's race, there's class, there's position and title, and, you know, there's probably some elements of sexual orientation inequality as well.

Lisa, a White woman, shared an experience working with a man of Color. She talked about how they engaged in an unhelpful banter related to a hierarchy of oppression where "he'll play the color card, then I'll play the queer card, and we get into these interesting, unhelpful kind of cycles."

In addition to acknowledging the influence social identities had on their own relationships with people with whom they worked, they also described the influence of identities on activism. Because some people with marginalized identities are more in tune with oppression and the way it operates within society, some participants believed people with multiple marginalized identities were better able to understand and address sexism. Lisa discussed her experience working with gay students: "they bring the knowledge that their identities have afforded them to see where there are huge gaps in what is being offered." Linda talked about the benefit of working with men of Color with critical perspectives:

A lot of the ... men who are most committed are men of Color. And there probably is a relationship there. There is probably a way that men of Color have an easier time understanding systemic oppression because they experience it.

Conversely, the participants also discussed how people involved in the mainstream feminist movement often exclude those with marginalized identities. For example, Kelly described how she does not see anyone else like her doing this work:

It's a struggle for me, because I'm Latina, I'm small, and I come from a poor neighborhood, I'm from [large city], and so I guess I just ... don't even see many other people from similar backgrounds as my own going to college, let alone being involved in these college groups and these movements that take place on college campuses. It's hard for me to compare and contrast my experiences to other people's experiences who don't share a similar background as I do.

Similarly, participants learned from men of Color that some traditional discussions of masculinity do not resonate with them. Because male privilege is so closely connected with White privilege, many conversations related to masculinity fail to acknowledge the complex dynamics surrounding race and class. When discussing masculinity as if all men are the same, some voices are left out of the conversation, resulting in isolation and marginalization due to the intersections of racism and classism with masculinity.

Finally, six of the eight participants identified as queer or lesbian. As the researchers, we noted this high number of participants as compared with the general population and some participants specifically discussed their queer identities when describing their experiences working with men in feminism. Carleigh noted the importance of queer women doing work with men as allies in feminist movements because they had a women-centered place to "retreat" to for comfort and rejuvenation:

I spend a lot of time in hostile environments. I'm doing this work in pro-feminist men's circles and sometimes, they really don't show up like they could... There's a lot of liberatory possibility in engaging allies. But getting there sometimes, it's a lot of work, and it's a lot of emotional trauma... I don't think I could do this if I didn't have a partner who's a woman. I don't think I could do this if I didn't have space, women-only, women-majority, queer women, spaces to retreat to, and sort of gear up again... How do I do that unless I have some really fulfilling, nurturing, nourishing environments of women? So of course it's going to take a lesbian to do some of this.

Recognizing the influence of intersectionality on people's experiences in the feminist movement allows male allies and their supporters to further understand ways to address oppression. Several participants noted further developing their own identities as allies to other marginalized groups by working with men as allies in feminism. In the next section, we illuminate the challenges faced by women striving to engage men as allies in feminist and anti-violence work.

### **Counter-Narratives**

Participants shared numerous challenges they experienced working with men in feminist movements, providing a counter-narrative to the uncritical acceptance of self-identified male feminists as "the good guys." Through examples of violence and unsafe spaces, microaggressions, and men capitalizing on instant credibility, the participants illuminate the challenges associated with engaging men as allies in feminist work.

**Violence and unsafe spaces.** Sexual assault represents one of the deepest forms of harm allies can perpetrate, and two participants discussed instances of "allies" committing sexual violence during the time they were engaged as an ally. Kelly shared her experience as an advisor to a mixed-gender peer-education group that works to end sexual violence against women:

It later came out that these guys would drink with some of the... girls and then have sex with them... We know for a fact that if you're under the influence it's not consensual sex... What do you do about those situations? Do you remove that program so that you don't have... men walking around calling themselves advocates and not really being advocates?

Other participants revealed stories about pro-feminist men who created unsafe situations through the use of violent and aggressive language. Carleigh's story about an experience she had while participating on a panel about gender at a national conference painted a vivid picture:

I have been singled out to be heckled. [Once I was sitting on a panel, and] this man stands up at the end when there's questions. And he needs to stand to ask

his question. All of us are sitting, we're not on a stage, we're sitting up in the front, most of the people are sitting, but he feels the need to stand to voice his question. And he barks at me. He's looking at me, he's shaking his fist... He's like... "what do you want young men to be? What are you going to tell young men? I've worked with young men... I've seen their red bloodied bodies struggling to figure out what it is you want from them..." I can see the spittle flying from his mouth... His face is red, his fist is kind of pumping towards me, he's standing and sort of rocking forward, and his arms are really big like a bear, and he's screaming, "What do feminists say? What do feminists say?"

Carleigh knew the man raising these questions and she described him as a senior scholar who has written about college men's identity development and describes himself as a "pro-feminist" man. She further described her fear associated with this experience, a theme that resonated throughout the participants' stories.

**Microaggressions.** Microaggressions are a less overt way of causing harm, yet they can still have a large impact and participants frequently mentioned them. Consistent with the definition of microaggressions, these were generally unintentional behaviors, often associated with acting on traditionally masculine gender roles. Participants shared their experiences where men assumed they knew what was best for women and the movement, took over and controlled movements, excluded and talked over women, and used their power and privilege to be heard.

Katrina noted the impact that gendered microaggressions had on her life:

The vast amounts of time you spend spinning your wheels thinking about whether or not it's important enough of an issue to talk about is just such a waste of time and such a headache, and you lose hours of sleep and you lose hours of your life trying to calm your mind down to decide whether or not this is big enough of an issue to take up... These little microaggressions actually amount to something much larger.



Further, she expanded on her experience with examples of microaggressions resulting from unexamined traditionally masculine behaviors:

[Men] come to the space with a sense of privilege and entitlement and are wanting to address the issues relying on past cultural norms that allow them to step into meetings and take control of the conversations and dictate the way that issues are addressed and to try to get credit when they haven't really done the work, and to minimize women's contributions, or to speak over them, or to say the same things that women have just said and then call it their own... they feel perfectly comfortable taking on ownership around what's just happened and calling it their own.

Carleigh also explained an experience highlighting a man whom she considered to be an ally acting in a traditionally masculine way, perpetuating a microaggression toward her:

Currently [a national organization] has a...campaign that is sort of a reactionary movement in response to the shootings of women in Illinois and Virginia Tech... No one is talking about the fact that it's not just anyone doing violence on campus, it's men... And most of them are White men... [My male friend and I are] fired up... We have a couple of conversations over the next week or so, and I'm like, "let's use [the communities we're connected to]... we can get a letter out, we can do an open letter in our next newsletter, we could send out a statement ... He was like, "Something, we need to do something big."... So what happens? [He] writes the letter, singly. Authors it, sends it over email to every important person in higher education... Do you so badly need to have your ego stroked around this that you cannot set that shit aside, and engage in a little grassroots political movement? You couldn't coauthor this thing?... You sent it yourself, you did it in this rugged, individualistic American mythos of the 'great man' theory, centered in standing dominant upon all the bodies of all the other folks who've

done this work. You literally stood on the shoulders of giants. And you kind of left footprints.

These experiences illustrate the way in which male socialization may influence well-intended efforts to address sexism. While most men striving to engage in feminism do not intentionally act on traditional forms of masculinity, gender socialization influences their behavior and may lead to unconscious behavior resulting in microaggressions.

**Capitalizing on instant credibility.** Participants shared they often observe men as allies benefiting from instant credibility to which women-identified feminists do not have access. The pattern of praising men as allies has become so ingrained in society that many women-identified feminists have internalized the practice and participate in providing excessive credibility and praise to men as allies. Excessive gratitude towards men who engage in gender-related activism leads to an inequity in resource distribution for men and women's programs. Additionally, instead of acknowledging that the instant credibility they receive is inappropriate, allied men sometimes use it to their advantage to capitalize on women's experiences. Linda vividly expressed her realization of this:

There were moments when I would see these guys stand up and speak and realize that they had a different kind of...instant credibility than I would have had with my ten years of experience working in the field... When that was pointed out to me, I definitely felt concerned and I think it would be safe to say I felt resentful of it. One of my very good friends who works in the field said to me once... "You know, he's a guy who goes around making a lot of money off of women's pain." And it kind of rang true for me. I mean I think that he does great work and I think that all the men working in the movement do great work, but they also, some of them, command high fees for their work, and feel no compunction about that, whereas a lot of women have been going around and talking and organizing and strategizing in the movement, either for free or for very low pay for a long time.

Similarly, Kelly was hurt by an ally who chose to capitalize on her story. After Kelly participated in a well-publicized long-term anti-violence event with two other individuals, the male participant in the event chose to use deceptive tactics for his personal economic gain:

He wanted to make a speaking career out of talking about [our experience] and talking about violence against women as a man. And so he had me sign a waiver... Well it turns out that he took that waiver and he wrote a book and published that book without talking to me or the other woman [who was involved]. He kind of capitalized on our experiences and our stories.

Other participants shared similar experiences. Katrina speaks to two experiences related to benefitting from sexism and instant credibility. She brought a well-known anti-sexist man activist to her campus, and worked with a fraternity at her university to sponsor the event because she really wanted men on the campus to hear the speaker's message. The fraternity men did not end up doing much work, did not pay attention during the event, and most snuck out early. However, they still got the credit for the event because they sponsored it, even though the women did all the work. Similarly, for many years, the women's center at Katrina's university had been doing an awareness campaign about domestic violence and had never received much recognition for it. One year, a men's group took over and sponsored the event. They ended up with a television news story and on the front page of the newspaper for their work. They used all of the materials and the press release the Women's Center had created and the Women's Center helped promote the event, but the men received all the credit.

Participants in this study described unsafe spaces, microaggressions, and capitalizing on instant credibility as contributors to negative experiences working with men as feminist allies. Despite these negative experiences, the women in this study chose to continue engaging men as allies and discussed various recommendations to consider when building programs designed to engage men in feminist and anti-violence work.

## Recommendations

Engaging in activism across identities proves challenging in many social justice movements (McKenzie, 2014). Participants in this study highlighted a variety of recommendations for effectively engaging men allies in feminist movements.

**Engage community accountability processes.** Actively participating in community accountability processes (Kivel, 2000) is one strategy for addressing some of these challenges.

Julie highlights her vision for change through working with men in coalitions:

I think, on one level, if we're going to change society, it's going to take people of all genders to change the status quo, to change what already exists, and as we struggle to find ways to work in more equitable manners, we can serve as an excellent model, trying to create those dynamics we would like to see in larger society.

Often this process will include painful and frustrating moments; however, it is important to learn how to work and grow through these moments for societal change to occur (Davis & Wagner, 2005).

The most salient theme that came from discussions of accountability with the participants was balance. The women revealed challenges in finding a balance between including women in men's work to address sexism without tokenizing or relying too heavily on women to do the work for them. Additionally, participants noted the importance of balancing supporting men engaged in this work and praising them too much for work that should be expected of all people striving for social justice. Participants provided several examples where finding a balance was necessary, highlighting their own experiences related to working as a supporter of male allies. For example, Katrina expressed her experience supporting men involved in a men's program:

A lot of times there was a growing piece that was happening within certain folks within the [Men's Group] that they wanted some counseling or guidance for and they came to

me as that mentor. Again it's that classic experience of a woman's work isn't valued or isn't paid.

Participants believed it was other men's responsibility to support young men in a process of self-discovery, and challenge their male colleagues to take responsibility for this. While the process of discovering and understanding one's privilege can be full of emotion – including guilt and embarrassment – it can be marginalizing, exhausting, and frustrating for people with subordinated identities to be solely responsible for supporting their allies in their process of coming to understand their privilege.

**Challenge other men.** Similarly, many participants discussed the importance of men challenging other men, rather than relying on women to consistently be the voices raising concerns about sexism and oppression. Julie shared, “be lovingly critical of yourselves and each other,” noting the importance of direct feedback balanced with compassion and patience. Similarly, Michelle highlighted the importance of men speaking up in mixed gendered groups where a woman's authority or expertise is being challenged:

You need to work with your fellow men because I'm not going to get into some giant argument which isn't going to do anything...because of his own sexism this man doesn't want to listen to what I have to say.

Michelle continued with an example of an effective intervention:

I was at a training and the presenter was a woman, and one of the men in the audience...was very questioning and critical of what she was saying even though he didn't know anything about the topic, and we had another man in the audience say, “you know what, you've said you don't know anything about this topic, and here is this amazing presenter who does know a great deal about it, you know, please stop interrupting.”

**Practice self-awareness.** Participants described the importance of self-awareness, education, and authenticity when engaging in ally-related work. Most importantly, participants

named the importance of listening – listen to women’s stories related to oppression and listen to each other. In addition, participants described the importance of spaces for on-going discussion and growth. Linda articulated the importance of this space:

What I’ve learned mostly is that, whenever we’re talking about young men particularly we have to remember that they’re in a developmental process and that they’re not going to come out of the womb fully formed in their understanding about feminism. But that being said, men that want to learn about feminism and want to be a part of feminist movement in a productive way very much need to be given the room and space to grow and learn about the issues just as much as women do. And that doing that will benefit us immensely because they will go on to impact other men and women of course, but that that often means being patient and open and going through a journey of learning about these issues with young men and not assuming that right away they’ll get everything.

The recommendations provided by the participants are complex and require sustained commitment over time. Engaging in allied work is not easy for anyone involved and requires authenticity and vulnerability usually only established through long-term relationships. In the next section, we describe implications and conclusions related to the participants’ experiences and insights.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The participants in this study described benefits of working with men consistent with the master narrative about men’s role in feminism. Primarily, women-identified feminists highlighted the importance of men talking to other men about the nature of sexual assault and intervening in sexist situations (Gidycz et al., 2011; Piccigallo, Lilley, & Miller, 2012). However, participants’ experiences also shed light on the influence of intersecting identities on anti-violence and allied work and the challenges associated with working with men as allies. Participants also provided some recommendations for engaging in accountability practices.

Participants' negative experiences working with men as allies ranged from overt harm to microaggressions to men unconsciously acting on traditionally masculine gender roles. Two participants described instances of sexual violence committed by men involved in anti-violence work, which is significant. Some perpetrators may be consciously engaging in anti-violence programs to be perceived as "good guys," making it easier for them to target potential victims. Unfortunately, this behavior is difficult to detect and cannot be easily thwarted. In addition to remaining vigilant about potential perpetrators engaging in anti-violence work, organizers of men's programs must use caution not to perpetuate the "good guy" mentality, as this mindset fails to acknowledge the ways in which all people engage in marginalization and supporting systems of privilege. Separating the "good guys" from the "bad guys" (Armato, 2013) without acknowledging that reality is much more complex results in women's automatic trust of men who identify as feminist.

Consistent with the concept of enlightened sexism (Armato, 2013), participants in this study described men's lack of awareness of their own behavior and potential to perpetuate sexism. Most men engaged in anti-violence work have participated in some training and read important work about sexism and violence, resulting in an intellectual understanding of sexism. Further, these men can articulate examples of male privilege and identify problematic behaviors "out there," yet may fail to recognize the ways their own behavior may be rooted in internalized dominance and traditionally masculine gender roles (Armato, 2013). To effectively engage as allies to women, men must engage in constant self-reflection and awareness. Finding the balance between self-aggrandizement and critical self-reflection to change behaviors proves challenging for many allies. Long-term relationships with people invested in the development of men as allies may prove beneficial for navigating this challenge.

Women working with men in feminist anti-violence movements often choose not to challenge or address microaggressions they experience from well-intended male allies because they do not identify the microaggression in the moment, have experienced defensiveness on the

part of their allies, or do not have the energy to challenge every instance of a microaggression. By continuing to perpetuate feminist men as “good guys” rather than people who can make mistakes, feminists unintentionally contribute to the overstated, uncritical importance of men in the feminist movement. Women must find the courage to name dynamics related to sexism in feminist movements to help facilitate the process of self-awareness among male allies.

Participants in this study described the complexities of identity politics surrounding anti-violence work. Some of the White women in this study compared their experiences attempting to engage in allied behavior related to race with the men striving to be feminist allies, resulting in some compassion for their struggles. Keeping in mind that allied behavior is a developmental process (Broido, 2000; Waters, 2010) may help facilitate challenges and support for men attempting to engage as allies. Participants also highlighted the importance of recognizing the varied ways men experience masculinity in relationship to their race, class, and sexual orientation. Designing “men’s programs” with a straight, White, able-bodied masculine man in mind results in further marginalization of men of Color and gay men. However, designing anti-violence programs with an intentional focus on anti-oppression results in a more complex understanding of violence which may allow for more nuanced responses to oppression and violence.

Consistent with the literature about accountability in allied movements, participants discussed the importance of self-awareness, empathy, and listening as important components of engaging in allied behavior (Kahn & Ferguson, 2010; Katz, 2006; Messner, 1997; Schacht & Ewing, 1997). Edwards’ (2006) work on allied behavior provides a framework for working with men as feminist allies. Although some men may enter feminist spaces as an aspiring ally for self-interest or altruism with the intention of “helping” or “protecting” women (Edwards, 2006, p. 46), facilitators of men’s spaces can work with men to help them understand the ways in which patriarchy also hurts them moving toward engaging as an ally for social justice. Aspiring allies for social justice work with, rather than for, the group they are attempting to ally for and



understand their role in addressing oppression and the role they may play in perpetuating oppression.

Working with, rather than for, women-identified feminists is an essential component of effectively engaging men. Although there may be some benefit to male-only spaces for men to begin to explore gender socialization (Barone et al., 2007), the continuation of male-only spaces to address violence against women may prove problematic because there are no women-identified people in the space to provide accountability for the work. The importance of male-only spaces is for men to have a space to freely process their understanding of their masculinity without burdening women with the role of helping to process the guilt and shame associated with understanding male privilege. Although this is an important and on-going process in which male allies should engage, it is not the same as violence prevention work. Violence prevention work should happen in partnership with people of all genders to ensure that men as allies are accountable to the women and trans people for whom they strive to ally.

### **Conclusion**

Working to end sexist violence is a shared responsibility. Acknowledging the ways in which men are harmed by patriarchy without distracting from the significant and direct consequences women experience as a result of patriarchy contributes to a shared understanding and commitment to eradicating oppression. Authentic relationships between men as allies and the women they strive to support contribute to understanding the various roles required in a shared commitment to ending oppression. Collective conversation makes a difference. Authentic relationships allow women to share their frustrations and hurt with their allies, resulting in deeper understanding of the complexity of oppression and further support for aspiring men as allies.

The concept of accountability is complex. Accountability includes striking a delicate balance between supporting and challenging allies and discovering a shared commitment to ending oppression. While it is important to support allies to continue engaging in challenging

work, this support should not come at the expense of critical awareness. Feedback is a gift. Providing critical feedback is not necessarily easy for the person giving it, or for the person receiving it; therefore, when provided with feedback, allies must take the opportunity to learn. The longer we remain in relationship with each other, the easier it is to provide and to hear feedback from a place of care and compassion.

While men's programs are important, implementing them without consideration of the complexities of allied behavior proves problematic. Despite the best intentions of the initiators of men's programs, giving a "superman cape" to men who say they are committed to engaging in allied behavior may cause more harm than good. When men's programs use unchallenged patriarchal norms such as "real men" campaigns and chivalrous approaches to engaging men, they unintentionally reinforce men's power and dominance, which is contradictory to the stated purposes of the programs (Davis, 1999). Future research may include further exploring the complex realities and relationships among women and men-identified feminists. Researchers may want to consider an in-depth study observing the behaviors and perceptions of behaviors of staff (of all genders) coordinating the many men's programs that exist on college campuses. Engaging in the practice of unlearning sexist behavior requires time and a supportive community and cannot be done overnight.

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