

Male Allies: Confusing for feminism.

 slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2014/10/15/male_allies_confusing_for_feminism.html



Aziz Ansari, male feminist.

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Male allies are having a moment. In the space of the past month, Emma Watson stood in front of the United Nations and urged men to join the feminist movement under the banner [#HeForShe](#). President Obama [responded personally](#) to the NFL's handling of domestic abuse, saying that as "the father of two daughters," he knows that "hitting a woman is not something a real man does." Aziz Ansari sat on David Letterman's couch, [came out as a feminist](#), and said that anyone who contests the idea that Beyoncé "should be making 23 percent less than Jay Z" ought to join him. And the Grace Hopper Celebration [brought top executives](#) from Facebook, Google, and Microsoft to the stage for the "Male Allies Plenary Panel," where they were to talk about how high-powered male allies can advocate for women in tech.

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Too bad the GHC male allies panel spent less time discussing how men can advocate for women than it did instructing women to advocate for themselves by "speaking up." ([They did](#), against the tone-deaf panelists.) Ansari's feminist identification was just "a watered-down version of something so many women have been arguing" for ages, as *BuzzFeed's* [Katie Heaney noted](#). (In the tradition of

“mansplainers everywhere,” she wrote, he cribbed his definition of feminism from the dictionary.) “As the father of daughters,” Obama apparently needed to create a female human with his very own sperm in order to understand that it’s not OK to beat them. (How far can this dubious claim to feminist identity extend—“as the son of a mother,” “as the boyfriend of a girlfriend,” “as the man who approaches women on the subway”?) And #HeForShe has finally encouraged [members of One Direction](#) to hold signs with hashtags on them and post soulful photos of their feminist solidarity to Twitter.

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Allies are important, except when they’re the worst. That is my takeaway from this current moment in man-feminist relations, but the idea is not new. In 2012, North Carolina State University sociologist Kris Macomber interviewed dozens of men and women who advocate against gendered forms of violence and found [seemingly endless contradictions](#) embedded in the process of incorporating men into feminist movements. The central conflict is simple: Because men are “members of the dominant group, they have access to social and institutional power that women lack,” Macomber writes, and that makes them valuable to feminism—but it also makes them representatives of a culture feminists are working to change.

When it comes to day-to-day interactions between allies and feminists, the problem becomes a lot more complicated. (Macomber’s dissertation on the topic unspools the paradoxes over nearly 200 pages.) Male allies are encouraged to speak up against domestic violence because “men listen to other men,” Macomber found; then again, the idea that male voices are privileged over female ones is part of the problem. Men only seem to flock to feminist activism when the word *men* is coded into the event or organization title ([Men For Choice](#); [Men Can Stop Rape](#)). On the other hand, men who enter female spaces without an explicit invitation may intrude on feminists seeking “a break from their everyday encounters with men.” Men who style themselves as “experts” in feminism overstate their qualifications, but those who insist that their feminism is a “process” and that they will invariably “make mistakes” seem to be granting themselves a license to mess up. Some feminists applaud men just for speaking out; others resent the fact that men are idolized for saying, as one female activist told Macomber, “the same exact thing Ida B. Wells said back in like 1824.” Even if feminist men exclusively produced “Sensitive, Correct, Good Takes,” Kat Stoeffel [argued in *The Cut*](#) last week, they’d still be “taking up space that a woman might have otherwise occupied.”

Macomber notes that when male allies work to “redefine” masculinity—as in the long-running Men Can Stop Rape campaign “[My Strength Is Not for Hurting](#),” which foregrounded the idea that men are real strong—they signal an attempt to participate in feminism without actually shedding their male privilege. But that’s also a politically expedient tactic—it’s why President Obama calls on boys to be “real men” instead of asking them to “dismantle the patriarchy.” Male allies often position themselves in opposition to typically sexist dudes in order to find a community inside feminism, but identifying as one of the “good guys” can feel like a denial of their own role in the problems. (Meanwhile, men who guiltily disclose every sexist behavior they’ve personally exhibited can sound, frankly, gross.) Men are instructed to listen to women and follow their leadership, but if they seem overeager to earn female validation, their ulterior motives may be questioned.

So how is a man supposed to act? If you ask two feminists, they’ll inevitably disagree. Several female anti-violence advocates told Macomber that they’ve met wonderful allies through their work but can’t easily define what that means; they sense when a man just “gets it.” Macomber, now a sociology professor at Meredith College, says that although the term *male accountability* is often repeated in the movement, its definitions are “squishy,” “abstract,” and “confusing.” She argues that the feminist approach to allies could benefit from more “action-oriented language” and “very explicit guidelines.”

Welcome to feminism, dudes: This is the type of stuff we are dealing with every day. (Don’t get us started on Beyoncé.) The confusion over the role of male feminists is a prism for viewing fractures within the movement itself: Is feminism most effective as a radical fringe movement or a broad coalition? Should it stay grass-roots or go corporate? Is “feminist” a label that every person defines for

themselves, or does it reference specific political beliefs and commitments? Should feminism focus squarely on women, or on gender itself?

If you're a man, don't answer those questions. When I reached out to some men I've observed advocating for feminism online, I couldn't wring any complaints about how women had policed their contributions. One man sent me 400 words detailing how his male privilege outweighed any possible nitpicking with feminists, concluding: "any struggle I face is about .00001 percent of the struggle women face in their day-to-day existence." Jamie Kilstein, who runs [Citizen Radio](#) and authored this month's book [#Newsfail](#) with partner Allison Kilkenny, was similarly interested in centering the conversation on the horrific responses he's received from anti-feminist dudes when he tries to advocate for women. These answers strike me as simultaneously self-aware, self-preserving, and probably correct: It is easier to be a man navigating feminism than it is to be a woman facing, say, the conflicting advice of Sheryl Sandberg's [Lean In](#).

After years of studying male ally-feminist relations, Macomber has found that "it's ultimately good that we're having these uncomfortable conversations, because it brings us closer and closer to coming up with good solutions." And it's worth remembering that wrestling over "how to integrate men in ways that don't undermine gender equality" is a step up from "having to convince men that it's a problem in the first place."*

* **Correction, Oct. 15, 2014:** *This post originally misquoted Kris Macomber as saying that feminists are considering "how to integrate men in ways that don't undermine gender inequality"; she said that feminists are considering "how to integrate men in ways that don't undermine gender equality."*