

INTEGRATING MEN AS ALLIES IN ANTI-VIOLENCE WORK: ACCOUNTABILITY AND BEYOND¹

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Efforts to involve men as allies in domestic and sexual violence work are expanding, marking a shift for these historically women-led movements. Activists and scholars have identified the internal tensions and unintended consequences accompanying this shift, namely the sexism and male privilege men bring into movement spaces (Atherton-Zeman 2009; Flood 2003; Macomber 2012; Macomber and Sniffen 2011). In this paper, I examine how activists are responding to these challenges by emphasizing “men’s accountability.” I argue that although activists have successfully integrated accountability discourse into movement spaces, there is often a gap between discourse and practice. I identify two challenges that hinder accountability practices and offer suggestions for improving accountability practices at the group and organizational levels. This paper offers insights that can be used to inform men’s growing involvement and leadership in sexual and domestic violence work.

INTRODUCTION

If you’re a man involved in gender justice work, then you have probably heard the term “accountability” being talked about. Within anti-domestic and sexual violence work specifically, it is nearly impossible to be involved without hearing “accountability” defined as a cornerstone of men’s activism (Cohen 2000). Yet, despite the widespread emphasis on accountability, it is an issue that activists frequently struggle with, both in terms of its meaning and implications. What exactly does “accountability” have to do with male allies? What does it mean to “be accountable?” What does accountability look like in practice? To whom should you be accountable to, and when? These questions are worth unpacking. And, while I certainly don’t have all the answers, I can offer some insights that I hope will stimulate further dialogue.

I spent three years studying men’s involvement in anti-violence work for my doctoral

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research. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork, interviewed dozens of activists (women and men), and collected a wide range of archival and textual data. I wanted to learn more about how women and men are working together in a movement that has historically been women-led, but that is expanding efforts to recruit men as allies and leaders. One of the main findings of my research is that, along with the “men as allies” development, has come an increasing emphasis on “men’s accountability.” So much so, that there are now entire conferences, sessions within conferences, webinars, tasks forces, men’s institutes, and activist working groups designed specifically to address men’s expanding role in the movement, where discussions of “men’s accountability” are central.

Here is an example. At an anti-violence conference I attended, which was organized to generate dialogue about men’s expanding role, a woman activist said, “What I have often seen from my own work [at the sexual assault coalition] and from what I know other women have experienced from their own work, men’s involvement may very well be the most pressing issue in the movement today. And, with that in mind, it is crucial that we address some of the potential risks of engaging men.” Another woman replied, “I really do value men in the movement. Truly, I do. I think they have a very important role to play. But, sometimes, I feel like men are coming into the movement with good intentions, but because they haven’t done their homework, and don’t know the history of the movement, they don’t know about the underlying problems of sexism, so they end up reinforcing those very things.” A male activist responded with, “That is absolutely the case. Absolutely. We have made significant progress in engaging men and bringing more men into this work. But with that has come some challenges in how men are moving through this movement. I guess what concerns me is that we’re gonna throw the baby out with the bathwater.” The conversation then shifted to the importance of “men’s

accountability.” This kind of dialogue is commonplace throughout anti-violence work and reflects the sometimes contentious reactions to men’s growing involvement and leadership.

The emphasis on men’s accountability, then, is intended to mitigate the unintended consequences of men’s involvement—namely the inadvertent sexism and male privilege men bring into movement spaces. If you’re not sure what that looks like, it can look like any of the following things: talking over women and interrupting them, dominating work meetings (or, as activists often refer to it, “taking up too much space”), claiming to be an expert with only minimal experience, being paid more money than women, and sexually objectifying women, among others (Macomber 2012; Macomber and Sniffen 2011). Other critiques center around male activists’ elevated status within the movement and the undue praise and attention they receive, or what I described in my research as the “glass escalator effect.”²

I’m certainly not the first person to point out the unintended consequences of involving men as allies. In her 2011 essay, “Expecting More: Perspective of a Woman Working to Engage Men in Ending Male Violence,” former Executive Director of Men Stopping Violence, Shelley Serdahely, identified an unintended consequence of efforts to increase men’s involvement. She writes, “In our excitement, we can overlook the fact that there are all kinds of men, which (among other things) makes engaging them quite challenging (95).” Serdahely noted the importance of recognizing “the spectrum of ways in which [men] relate to, and might be engaged in working to end violence against women” (95). Also, Michael Flood (2003) has written about how men in the movement benefit from “patriarchal privilege” in ways women do not, citing how men’s groups receive more favorable media attention, and how individual men tend to

² Sociologist Christine Williams (1990) coined the term “glass escalator” to refer to men’s experiences in female-dominated work, where they advance quickly to top leadership positions. The glass escalator effect runs counter to the glass ceiling effect, which is what women experience when they work in male-dominated professions (women hit the glass ceiling, men ride the glass escalator).

evoke positive reactions, especially from women. Veteran activist Ben Atherton-Zeman (2009) cautioned against the open invitation for “all men” to join the movement. He claimed that doing so undermined the movement’s anti-sexist goals:

More and more men are finally joining the movement to end men’s violence against women...However, the rush to involve men needs to be tempered with wisdom and caution. Certainly male involvement can be a positive thing...But many communities are reporting that we men who label ourselves “allies” are still a large part of the problem—acting our sexism and denying it, refusing to be accountable to women, or even perpetrating violence ourselves (8).

The emphasis on “accountability,” then, is a way to acknowledge that, while getting men to commit to gender justice work is an important first step, it is not the only step. After that, the *nature* of their involvement matters because these are movements working to promote gender equality. This is an important lesson to pass onto eager newcomers.

THE EMPHASIS ON MEN’S ACCOUNTABILITY: PAST AND PRESENT

It might be helpful to point out that the term “accountability” has long been embraced within sexual and domestic violence work, and in gender justice work more generally. In the 1970s, victim advocates pushed for *offender accountability* to hold violent men responsible for their use of violence against women. In the 1980s, advocates worked to build *institutional accountability*, which made social institutions responsible for ensuring that survivors received the services they needed (such as legal representation, health care, counseling, etc.). By the 1990s, as men’s anti-violence groups and organizations expanded throughout the country, activists extended their use of the term to include *male ally accountability*, which sought to hold men responsible for their behaviors within movement spaces. There was a shared understanding

that—although men’s involvement was important and welcomed—male activists should be accountable to women and to women’s leadership.

Today, activists work hard to integrate talk about “men’s accountability” into movement discourse. For example, at a men’s anti-violence conference I attended, the conference facilitator stressed how important it is for men to hold each other accountable:

We, as men, need to step up. We need to be willing to say to another man, to one of our brothers, to our friend, to the guy next to us, “What you just said is not ok. It’s not ok, and here’s why.” And by holding each other accountable in that way, we are doing the real work. That is the work.

This emphasis on men holding each other accountable signifies an important shift in the micro-politics of gender justice activism. As more men become involved in these efforts, the emphasis is shifting from men being accountable to women (although this is still deemed important), to men holding each other accountable. The current emphasis on “men’s accountability” also defines men’s involvement in relational terms. That is, men’s involvement should be arranged and structured in relation to women’s work, with men’s groups and organizations supporting women’s groups and organizations—rather than competing with and/or working in isolation from them. Again, these are important lessons for newcomers.

ACCOUNTABILITY DISCOURSE VERSUS PRACTICE

Ultimately, it seems that the emphasis on “men’s accountability” is meant to aid men’s socialization and integration into anti-violence work in ways that “minimize the damage,” as Atherton-Zeman called it (2009). What I found in my research, however, is that there is often a gap between accountability discourse and its practice. I identified two obstacles that make accountability practices difficult to implement: (1) a unified definition of accountability is

missing and, (2) men are often reluctant to hold each other accountable, and therefore, the burden often falls on women's shoulders.

Lack of a Unified Definition of Accountability

With so much emphasis on “men's accountability” within the movement, I was surprised to discover that the activists I interviewed struggled to define it. When activists did define it, their definitions varied considerably. I asked all of my interviewees the same question: “Something I've been hearing a lot about lately is men's accountability. What does that mean to you?” Several activists admitted that they did not know how to define it exactly, adding that it was a “good” and “important” question and, as Tamara³ said, “a really fundamental concept for us but one that's hard to define.” Audrey said, “You know, that's a good question. I think about that a lot and it's hard to put into words.” Chantel also didn't know how to describe it, but said that she “know[s] when men are *not* doing it.” When I asked Phil, he said, after an extended pause, “Well, that was something we worked really hard on some years ago. Now, I'm not so sure.”

When activists did articulate definitions of accountability, their definitions tended to fall into one of two categories. They either described accountability in *proactive* terms, which meant that men's involvement should be guided by women's leadership. As Ray said, “Accountability means that men doing this work need to be advised by women in leadership who are on the front lines doing the work.” Or they defined it in *reactive* terms, which stressed the importance of policing individual men and men's receptivity to criticism. As Robby said, “Being a man who is accountable in this work means that it's part of our job, as men, to take feedback from women, to hear their criticisms, and to be receptive to that criticism...”

³ All names are pseudonyms.

Other activists defined accountability in terms of whether men were self-reflective about male privilege. As Linda said, “Men are accountable when they recognize that they bring their privilege into the work.” Similarly, Sheila said, “Accountability is, first and foremost, recognizing that you in fact have male privilege, and then it’s about acknowledging it. Don’t pretend it’s not there, because it is.” In short, while the discourse and rhetoric about “men’s accountability” is prominent and pervasive, a unified and consistent definition of what accountability actually means in practice is missing.

Men’s Reluctance to Hold Other Men Accountable

Despite so much emphasis on men holding each other accountable, I found in my research that it was mostly women who publicly drew attention to issues of male privilege and sexism in movement spaces. In fact, in the instances when women held men accountable for something they did or said, they often called attention to how male activists failed to do so, and described these instances as “men dropping the ball,” “men not walking the walk,” and “men not doing their work.”

Why does it matter that women are usually the ones to call men out? Well, for one, it raises red flags for women who are looking for men to hold each another accountable. That is, men’s reluctance to police other men and to draw attention to issues of male privilege intensifies women’s distrust of male activists. In fact, Audrey admitted that she left her position as a board member of a men’s organization because of how the men failed to hold a particular man accountable when he said “really troubling things.” She said, “The men kind of sat back and bonded. They weren’t willing to take on their male colleague. They weren’t willing to, in a meeting, call him out on things that were happening, and it was just very disappointing. It was the women who took action and demanded some accountability.”

For a man to call out another man for saying or doing something sexist means that, in that moment, he is trading his patriarchal allegiance and bond with other men for an allegiance with women. The problem is that dominant group allies are conditioned to align themselves with, and to collude with, their dominant group member peers—not with minority activists. In other words, men are encouraged to align themselves with other men and not be what Allan Johnson (2001) refers to as “gender traitors.” This tendency, combined with a desire not to scare newcomers away, might make it unlikely that men will confront each other as often as necessary.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND BEYOND: SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

With the heightened emphasis on “accountability” that surrounds men’s growing involvement and leadership in anti-violence work, it may benefit anti-violence organizations and activists groups to implement practices that support men’s involvement without reinforcing existing gender inequalities. I offer five suggestions: (1) require newcomers to receive training and education work before stepping into visible male leadership roles; (2) cap men’s speaking fees; (3) link men’s organizations to women’s organizations and groups; (4) institutionalize a process to address issues of privilege internally; and (5) re-conceptualize accountability to include an emphasis on *building gender equity*.

To counteract the “expert syndrome,” which often places male activists in visible leadership positions prematurely, organizations could implement a policy requiring new male activists to receive sufficient training and education before stepping into visible, public positions. For state domestic and sexual violence coalitions that provide trainings about the dynamics and impact of men’s violence against women, newcomers to men’s organizations could be required to attend a series of women-led trainings. If men’s involvement and exposure is to other men and to “men’s work” only, then their involvement is detached from women’s voices, women’s

efforts, and the groundwork women's organizations have developed. Attending events dominated by men, and learning only from men's voices, reduces the likelihood that men will be accountable to women's leadership. If men are expected to be accountable to women's leadership, then it is important that they know what women's leadership looks like—firsthand.

Secondly, in terms of pay inequities, one way women's organizations could ensure that male activists are not being paid more than women activists for speaking engagements is to create an organizational policy that states, "No man will be paid more to speak at our events than women." Despite one activist's claim that "Men probably get paid more money because they ask for more money," a policy like this would eliminate this trend and institutionalize pay equity.

Third, a recommendation for men's organizations specifically is to incorporate a women's advisory group to inform the organization's decision-making process. The advisory group could be a collective of women activists and advocates who work for neighboring agencies, or have relevant experience. The point of the advisory group would be to ensure that men are not working in isolation from the direct beneficiaries of the movement's work. To bring power and authority to their voices, marginalized women activists have formed caucuses in women-led organization. In much the same way, men's organizations could incorporate women's caucuses, or advisory groups into their organizational structure. Indeed, models of this kind of partnership already exist, and attention should be paid to their effectiveness. Some questions to explore are: What do effective partnerships between women's organizations and men's organizations look like? What makes them effective?

Before effective accountability practices can be built into the movement at large, it may be helpful for organizations and groups to create internal processes for people to address privilege, power, and inequality within their own sites of work. It can be helpful to incorporate a

process that enables people to expose issues related to privilege and power and to learn from each other (Frank and Morris 1994). A notable example of this is “the empowerment process,” developed by Phyllis B. Frank, Wayne Morris, and others at VCS, Inc. in New York. The goal is to create a process that is educational while being sensitive and responsible (Frank and Morris 1994). It may also be the case that the better individuals become at addressing issues of privilege and power internally, the better they can be at addressing violations that take place in larger, public settings.

Finally, the term “accountability” may benefit from being reinvented so that its meaning is more transparent and action-oriented. One suggestion is to re-conceptualize the term to include an explicit focus on *building gender equity*. The phrase *build gender equity* uses active language, whereas “staying accountable” and “being accountable” uses passive language. The words we use are important because they motivate and incite action; they also shape the kinds of questions we ask. Perhaps an emphasis on building gender equity can generate more concrete action steps for the growing numbers of men recruited into these movements, as opposed to the somewhat vague and abstract concept of “being accountable.” Furthermore, if you consider what male activists can do as they work to end violence against women, and if you consider how the partnerships between women and men can look, it seems clear that the unifying goal is to build and model gender equity *inside* the movement. By focusing efforts on how to integrate male activists in ways that build and model gender equity, activists can stay more consistent with the movements’ broader goals of dismantling patriarchy and gender oppression *outside* the movement.

Indeed, there are tremendous benefits of expanding men’s participation in anti-violence work. For one, anti-violence messaging is reaching wider audiences. Secondly, activists are re-

defining violence against women as *men's* problem too, which is critical for examining men's use of violence in the first place. Third, men and women *are* working together, modeling cooperation and collaboration. These are valuable outcomes. On the other hand, recruiting male allies had not occurred without problems. Implicit in much ally activism is the reproduction of the very privilege the movement is working to overcome (Myers 2008). A cost incurred because of the "men as allies" development is that activists must continue to confront male privilege. Such tensions serve as constant reminders that gendered power differentials are pervasive and deeply entrenched. As men's involvement continues to grow, it is becoming even more important to address these issues. I hope this paper offers some talking points to inform future work.

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