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Allyship and Social Justice: Men as Allies in Challenging Men's Violence and Discrimination Against Women

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I acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the land and waters of Australia. I pay respect to Elders – past, present and future – and appreciate their cultures, knowledge and resilience.

Confronting and ending oppression against marginalised and minoritised peoples is at the heart of social justice-oriented social work practice. Developing a critical understanding of power and oppression and enacting social change aimed at challenging structural factors that contribute to oppression are integral to the core mandates of the social work profession (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014). Different ways of challenging oppression are therefore of significant interest to social workers. The allyship model of social justice offers social workers a meaningful way of engaging with anti-oppressive practices that help address privilege and interrupt oppression. In this chapter I will introduce the idea of allyship from a social justice perspective and illustrate it through the example of men allies working with a profeminist framework to challenge men's violence and discrimination against women (MVDAAW). I have chosen this example because this is a political position I am committed to, and because of my experiences of working against sexual and gender-based violence. Social workers can apply the core ideas of allyship to diverse contexts. I will occasionally discuss illustrative examples drawn from my personal and professional experiences. My purpose in doing so is not to communicate that my understanding of feminist issues is wholesome or that my politics is perfect. On the contrary, I hope the imperfect and evolving nature of my politics will become apparent in my sharing of these examples. I will discuss some of the salient aspects of allyship in this context, and argue that politicisation of allyship practices

is important to meaningfully serve a feminist agenda. I should add that gender-based violence is a broad subject, and in this chapter I only focus on men – cisgender men, in particular – in addressing discrimination and violence against women. Men perpetrate violence and discrimination against women as well as against people of diverse gender identities including transgender and genderqueer. I acknowledge that efforts to prevent and address gender-based violence have historically been led by women and people of diverse gender identities who have had to unfairly and disproportionately shoulder the weight of experiencing such violence and discrimination, educating others about it, and working to end it.

Allyship and social justice

Allies, from a social justice perspective, are persons ‘from a privileged group who make intentional choices to support or work for the rights of those from the oppressed group’ and are ‘committed to eliminating a form of oppression from which they benefit’ (Goodman, 2011, p. 157). As allies, members of dominant or oppressor groups (e.g. white people, men, cisgender people, non-disabled people) are invested in critically inspecting their unearned privilege in relation to members of the marginalised or oppressed groups (e.g. people of colour, women, transgender people, people with disability) and working towards diminishing this privilege in order to create a more just and equitable society. To be a social justice ally is to engage in the practice of allyship, which can be understood as ‘intentional, overt, consistent activity that challenges prevailing patterns of oppression, makes privileges that are so often invisible visible, and facilitates the empowerment of persons targeted by oppression’ (Ayvazian, 2010, p. 625). Allyship requires that members of the dominant group approach examination of their power and privilege as not simply a one-time activity but as a continuous process of critical self-reflection, becoming aware of the toxic effects of oppression in the lives of marginalised communities, and unceasingly attending to the power dynamics between themselves and targets of oppression with whom they seek to build alliances. Since people occupy multiple social identities at once, it is possible for most people to be members of both dominant and oppressed groups (Gibson, 2014). For example, cisgender immigrant men of colour living in predominantly white societies are members of dominant groups because of their gender identity but are also members of oppressed groups based on their racialised identity and migrant status. Since privilege is located along multiple axes of power, it is important to develop an intersectionality-oriented understanding of privilege when looking at dominant or marginalised identities. Intersectionality refers to

the idea that the different factors determining power such as race, class, sexual orientation, gender, age and so on operate not in mutual isolation but as ‘reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities’ (Collins, 2015, p. 2). Moreover, sometimes people may belong to what Adams and Zúñiga (2016) call ‘border identities’ (p. 109), that is, identities ‘that border but do not fully fit’ (p. 109) the binary of dominant and oppressed groups. Examples of border identities can be children of colour adopted and raised by white parents, or mixed-race people with one white parent; people with membership to such border identities experience unique and specific lived experiences of power and oppression (Adams and Zúñiga, 2016).

Historically the allyship model has its roots in anti-racist work (Gibson, 2014) and a substantial part of contemporary scholarship on allyship continues to focus on race and racism (e.g. Case, 2012; Reason et al., 2005; Spanierman and Smith, 2017). However, it has also now been applied to a wide range of social justice research and practice areas such as LGBTQ rights (e.g. Broido, 2000b; Duhigg et al., 2010; Pinto, 2014), violence against women (e.g. Casey, 2010; Fabiano et al., 2003), education (e.g. Boutte and Jackson, 2014; Edwards, 2006; Patton and Bondi, 2015), Islamophobia (e.g. Bhattacharyya et al., 2014), workplace discrimination (e.g. Sabat et al., 2013), and disability rights (e.g. Evans et al., 2005). There is no singular model of allyship in social justice and different authors have proposed different models (e.g. Bishop, 2002; Broido, 2000a; Edwards, 2006; Getz & Kirkley, 2003; Reason et al., 2005; Waters, 2010).

Men as allies

There is a significant and growing body of scholarship on the possibility and politics of men as allies in challenging MVDW. The reason why men should be involved in efforts to prevent and address MVDW is simple: it is primarily men who perpetrate it and benefit from it. Men allies’ engagement with challenging MVDW can take place at three levels: personal, interpersonal and systemic. At the personal level, the goal is to become aware of one’s own acceptance of patriarchal norms and values, and confront one’s own participation in sexist and misogynistic practices. At the interpersonal level, the goal is to identify and challenge patriarchal attitudes and practices of other men, and hold them accountable for their perpetration of MVDW. At the systemic level, the objective is to expose and indict structural sexism, such as sexual objectification of girls and women, normalisation of violence against women, and gender unequal and inequitable policies and practices in institutions, workplaces, laws and cultural customs. Of course, men’s participation as allies in ending

MVDAW is not an apolitical or straightforward enterprise. As Flood (2003) notes, 'men's collective and profeminist mobilizations on gender issues are a delicate form of political activity' (p. 458). Some feminist women are suspicious of men's involvement with feminism work and have problematised it (Bailey, 2015; Linder and Johnson, 2015; Williams, 1990). The concerns they have raised are important; some of the dangers of men's involvement in feminism include weakening of a feminist agenda, discounting women's work and leadership, and taking financial and other resources away from women who have experienced women's violence (Flood, 2011a). At the same time, some other feminist women support men's engagement and remain hopeful that men's participation can meaningfully contribute to feminist efforts to end MVDAW (hooks, 2000; Messner et al., 2015; Precopio and Ramsey, 2017).

An important idea at the core of men's engagement with feminist efforts to end MVDAW is that this work requires men's commitment to challenging their own gender privilege. The 'contradictory position' (Bailey, 2015, p. 443) of not just coming face-to-face with but also actively undercutting their own power and privilege is a slippery terrain, a 'situation that is replete with struggles and pitfalls' (p. 443). Although all men do not enjoy patriarchal privilege equally because their gender identity might possibly intersect with other marginalising identities in relation to race or ethnicity, religion, class, disability, sexual orientation and so on, all men inevitably benefit from the 'patriarchal dividend' (Connell, 1997, p. 64) based on unequal social structures vis-à-vis gender. 'Fighting patriarchy', therefore, for men, 'means fighting themselves' (Kahane, 1998, p. 213). Thus, when men participate in feminist efforts to end MVDAW, their motives and practices cannot be considered beyond suspicion. When men try to convince others through their 'confessional writing' (Williams, 1990, p. 64) – admittedly this chapter is partly an example of such writing – that they have 'laid down their arms' (p. 64), there are few reasons for feminists to accept them at face value.

There also are several arguments for encouraging men's engagement with feminist efforts to end MVDAW. As I have argued earlier, men have a role in addressing MVDAW because they are the primary offenders and beneficiaries of these oppressive practices and it is only fair to expect them to 'clean up their act'. This, however, is not the only reason why men could be interested in challenging MVDAW. Some men recognise that patriarchy costs men dearly in relation to their emotional, social and physical health (Pease, 2001; Scott-Samuel and Crawshaw, 2015; Sharma, 2015), and therefore participating in feminist struggles to undermine patriarchy can help them lead healthier and more fulfilling lives. Flood (2007) lists several arguments for involving men in fostering gender equality, including that men as gendered individuals

participate in gender relations in society and are therefore '*unavoidably* involved in gender issues' (p. 9, italics in original), that many men's attitudes and behaviours need to change in order to achieve gender equality, that men can possibly be productive stakeholders in building gender equality through realising that inequality and injustice are not merely women's concerns, and that excluding men from gender justice work can hurt such efforts by antagonising men.

If men want to engage with women in feminist movements, how might they go about it? In the following sections, I will discuss what I consider some important aspects of men's allyship practices towards challenging MVDAW.

Relationship with feminism and feminist women

I mentioned earlier that this chapter is, in part, confessional writing. Here is a confession: I used to identify as feminist but I no longer lay claim to this identity. I learnt about feminism when studying social work and immediately found it profoundly meaningful at personal and professional levels. It helped me understand and articulate the injustices around me that I witnessed, experienced and perpetrated. It gave me a peg on which to hang my own experiences of facing gender-based bullying in adolescence, while simultaneously forcing me to come face-to-face with my own patriarchal privilege. It enriched my friendships with people of diverse genders, and allowed me life-changing opportunities to learn from and work with women in feminist settings on challenging MVDAW. In many ways, feminism anchored my lived gendered experiences of being a man, and my evolving professional awareness as a social worker. Feminism and I had found each other, and I believed that I was a feminist. So, what happened?

I found profeminism, eventually. But before that I attended a 'Take Back the Night' march in the USA. A small group of young white men led the march, followed by a much larger group primarily comprised of women. 'What do we want', the leading men chanted. 'Safe streets', women chanted back. 'When do we want them?', asked the men. 'Now', was the response. The alignment of men's and women's experiences through the use of 'we' was bewildering. If streets were unsafe for a group of young, non-disabled, college-educated, cisgender white men in the American Midwest, then for whom were they safe?

Through this experience and many others, I realised that unless men become reflexive and conscientious about their position within feminism, they will continue to dilute and hurt feminist efforts regardless of their intentions. Men's ways of dominance and appropriation are, in Audre

Lorde's (1983) words, the 'master's tools' (p. 94) that cannot be used to dismantle patriarchy (or, as Lorde might say, the master cannot be trusted to use his tools to dismantle his own house). Therefore, men allies need to figure out their relationship with feminism.

Feminism is not about men, particularly cisgender men. Cisgender men do not, and cannot, fully comprehend the burden of patriarchy simply because of their patriarchal privilege and on account of the fact that they do not have to deal with the challenges of MVDAAW. When people occupy positions of privilege, their disproportionate social power diminishes their ability to notice and understand the damaging effects of oppression for marginalised groups. Just like white people living in white supremacist societies cannot fully understand the brutality of racism for people of colour, cisgender men in a patriarchal society cannot fully understand women's experiences of sexism and violence. I now believe that my previous understanding of myself as feminist was a naïve, uncritical position. When cisgender men seldom experience the full extent of patriarchy's wrath and while they remain agents of patriarchal oppression, it is not productive for them to lay claim to the feminist identity.

This does not mean that feminism has nothing to offer for men. On the contrary, it carries immense promise and potentialities for men. It allows men to imagine and work towards an equal and just world for everyone, including themselves, beyond the narrow and rigid boundaries of social constructs vis-à-vis gender. It lets men see and confront the toxicity of patriarchy in their own lives; for example, it helps them see how hegemonic masculinity marginalises other kinds of masculinities (Connell, 2005) and puts restrictions on fundamental things in their lives such as how they express their emotions, how they relate to women and how they should behave sexually. Feminism helps men become aware of the damage patriarchy causes in the lives of women and people of other genders, many of whom they may care for, and how their sexism, micro-aggressions and violence hurt these peoples. It offers men perspectives on developing nurturing, intimate and violence-free relationships with their children, romantic and sexual partners, parents, and friends, in contrast with relationships modelled after patriarchal values and practices. It gives men language to label and articulate their own challenges and struggles rooted in personal and societal expectations about being a man in a patriarchal society. Therefore men can, in fact they must, have a stake in feminist futures and possibilities (Brod, 1998).

How, then, do men stay invested in feminism without claiming to be feminists? Profeminism offers a constructive space for men allies to engage with feminism. Brod (1998) defines profeminism as the 'developing feminist politics of, by, and for men' (p. 208). He draws an important distinction between 'profeminism' and 'pro-feminism' through arguing

that the latter concept refers to men supporting feminism from the outside 'without a *position from which* to be either radical or activist' (p. 207, italics in original). Describing profeminism, Brod (1998) argues:

Profeminism of course includes pro-feminism as its primary principle, but it also includes much more. It is a call from and to men to develop feminist and pro-feminist personal and political principles and actions. It insists that men must recognize their own stake in the transformations advanced by feminism, *not* because men should put their needs ahead of others, but because this recognition is part and parcel of being able to fully commit oneself to the liberation of others. Thus, along with its pro-feminism, profeminism articulates men's contributions to and benefits from feminism. (p. 208, italics in original)

The profeminist identity offers men allies a standpoint from which to understand their own subjective location in relation to feminism, as well as develop a critical and nuanced relationship with feminism. Identifying as profeminist can serve men allies as a personal reminder of two things: one, that their own emancipation as gendered individuals is invariably linked to a feminist agenda, and two, that their role and place within feminism is not of co-opting and appropriating women's work but to invest in it following women's leadership.

Relationship between members of dominant and oppressed groups is of crucial importance in the context of allyship. Men allies need to cultivate respectful and productive alliances with feminist women. Here is another confessional story. Several years ago, I came across a feminist blog on the internet that I enjoyed and appreciated. At the time, I used to sporadically write for a blog on feminist issues in India. I discovered this new blog and wanted to explore the possibility of contributing to it. I emailed blog admins with some ideas. I received a polite but firm response saying that the blog was a women-only platform and they were not interested in men's contributions. I had no choice except to begrudgingly accept their decision, but I had a bit of sulk about it. I was 'one of the good guys', I thought, and resented that I had not been allowed to contribute when all I wanted to do was 'make a difference'. This is what unproductive and negative ally behaviour looks like. I did not accept that women-exclusive spaces are not only important but also necessary, expected the women running the blog to just agree with me instead of accepting their leadership, and failed to notice the stark contrast between my one small lack of opportunity to contribute to this blog and the overwhelming lack of opportunity women frequently face in every sphere of their social and professional lives. I also assumed that I could enter this space just because I wanted to be there, which reflects how routinely and unreflexively men colonise women's spaces. I am thankful I was

eventually able to view this experience as an educational moment, but I utterly failed to do so at the time it happened.

Bishop (2002) recommends a list of meaningful ally behaviours. Men allies can benefit from these ideas when building and maintaining alliances with women to challenge MVDAAW. These include but are not limited to listening and reflecting, being honest and authentic, educating yourself on oppression, speaking up against examples of oppression at work, not assuming the role of leading members of the marginalised group, refusing to act as a spokesperson for the oppressed group, not putting the responsibility of educating yourself on oppressed group members, and not expecting oppressed group members to provide emotional support to dominant group members.

At the core of men's ally behaviours has to be the idea of accountability to women (Pease, 2017). A woman participant in Macomber's (2018) study on male privilege in domestic violence work described accountability in this way: 'Accountability was about men realizing that being involved was not enough. It's *how* they got involved that really mattered. Are you following women's leadership and expertise? Are you responsive to women's criticisms to your work?' (p. 16, italics in original). Profeminist men can use this advice to guide their allyship practices.

Relationship with self

Relationship with oneself is crucial for an ally. Focusing on personal values, experiences and practices is integral to critical reflexivity in allyship. I will discuss two areas where men allies can face significant challenges with regard to exploring their relationship to self as allies challenging MVDAAW: guilt, and positivity towards self.

Guilt

Experiencing guilt is often a significant step on the journey to becoming an ally. As dominant group members begin to learn about oppression and its impact on the oppressed group, they begin to realise that contrary to popular belief that the 'problem' lies with the members of the oppressed group (e.g. 'people living in poverty are poor because they are lazy', 'immigrants are a burden on the economy'), it relates to the oppression perpetuated by members of the dominant group instead (Broido, 2000b). They start to examine their own role in perpetuating oppression and notice how they have been personally complicit. This upheaval in the

way they understand the world can often result in feelings of guilt and shame (Broido, 2000b).

I experienced guilt when working with women experiencing domestic violence in India. Many of these women had experienced months or years of physical, emotional or sexual violence perpetrated by their husbands. When I heard their stories and saw their injuries, I often felt embarrassed and guilty about being a man myself. Sometimes the intervention included working with men perpetrators whose wives had approached the agency for help. When they came in through the office door, I could observe some of them relax when they noticed that the social worker was a man. Occasionally these men would give me a look as if to say, 'You should understand my perspective because you too are a man.' Being considered 'on the same team' by my clients' violent partners, even if I only ever felt it in my gut, sickened me and sent my guilt soaring; I felt ashamed and anxious. Through supervision and mentorship of some feminist women, and critical reflexivity, I came to the understanding that my ideas and actions around my privilege guilt were not helpful. My clients did not need me to wallow in my own guilt and self-pity; they needed me to be the social worker who would help them challenge the violence they had been experiencing. When men perpetrators insinuated that I was one of them, my clients did not need me to ride my guilt horse into the sunset; they needed me to stand by them and send a clear message to the men who hurt them that violence and sexism were not okay. In other words, they needed me to be their ally, and I could not be one while I focused my energy on my guilt.

Being vulnerable is integral to being an ally. It is crucial for men allies to confront their unearned privilege and power. It is not only natural but also important to feel stung by the unfairness of the situation. Feeling contrition about one's sexist or violent attitudes and behaviours is important too. As allies, we must be reflexive, and critically so. We must also commit to personal change to align ourselves with feminist values. However, this should not result in descending into guilt if we wish to stay productive and contribute meaningfully.

Guilt, Kaufman (1994) suggests, 'is a profoundly conservative, demobilizing, and disempowering emotion' (p. 158). Men as members of the oppressor group may react to their privilege guilt in a wide range of ways. They may feel that they should not be feeling guilt for the actions of other men who perpetrate violence; they may feel overwhelmed or debilitated by emotions of guilt and may feel that the problem of patriarchy is too big for them to do anything about; they may avoid discussing or reflecting on patriarchy in others' and their own lives; they may feel cornered and defensive, and consequently refuse to be self-critical;

or they may focus their energy on themselves and their emotions of guilt and shame as opposed to utilising this energy to support the rights of women and focusing on women's issues. None of these responses to guilt is healthy or helpful.

It would be unwise to be entirely dismissive of guilt because it is often a part of the process of becoming an ally. Most allies will experience some guilt on their allyship journeys. The challenge is to channel that energy towards accountability. While men allies need not feel personal guilt over the violent actions of other men, they must feel personal accountability towards challenging MVDAAW. While violence can be pinned to the specific men who perpetrate it, the benefits of patriarchy as a system accrue to all men, whether or not they display violent behaviours themselves. MVDAAW is an essential component of patriarchy. Men collectively receive a 'patriarchal dividend' (Connell, 1997, p. 64) just for being men. All men share – unequally, but nonetheless share – among themselves the plunders of patriarchy. From this vantage point, it becomes easy to see how some men's violent actions benefit *all* men. While men allies need not feel guilty or remorseful for certain men's specific actions, the moral imperative for them is to accept personal accountability for benefiting from MVDAAW, and the only way they can address it is by rejecting and diminishing their patriarchal privilege.

Positivity towards self

An important attribute of an ally is to '[feel] good about own social group membership and [be] comfortable and proud of own identity' (Wijeyesinghe et al., 1997, as cited in Gibson, 2014, p. 202). It is therefore important for men allies to maintain a positive and affirming stance towards themselves as men. This may sound somewhat contradictory to the idea of allyship because men in patriarchal societies are not typically known for their low opinion of themselves. If anything, the patriarchal entitlement that men enjoy and often enact is part of the problem. How does the idea of allyship, then, align with a self-positive and self-affirming position? Brod (1998) argues that male-positivity is necessary for profeminist politics to keep it sustainable. He further argues that the idea that profeminist men should not see themselves as male-positive is based on the popular but incorrect notion that feminism is anti-male. When profeminist men allies take on male-positive stances with regard to themselves, they disrupt the normative ideas regarding masculinity. Therefore men allies can adopt male-affirmative approaches – critical approaches that reject the idea that men are innately or inevitably violent, and perceive men as 'beings who must be challenged to change and whose change must be

facilitated' (Brod, 1998, p. 201). From this standpoint, Brod (1998) argues, profeminism 'is not only compatible with, but requires, the firmest male affirmative stance' (p. 205).

A note of caution is warranted here. It is important to differentiate between self-positive attitude and self-congratulatory behaviour. Men's anti-sexist and anti-violence behaviours tend to garner a disproportionate amount of praise, including and especially from women, which is yet another sign of their patriarchal privilege (Flood, 2014; Linder and Johnson, 2015; Macomber, 2018). Men allies need to recognise that the bar for men is too low and the rewards are disproportionately high. They may receive praise for saying something that feminist women have been saying for years or decades, and may be extolled for simply showing up. There are many examples where men's attempts to support women are hyper-valued. Such disproportionate rewards for being a 'good man' can shore up patriarchal social structures instead of undermining or dismantling them. It is therefore contingent on men allies to redirect that attention back to feminist leaders and feminist issues. Bishop (2002) points out that, as an ally, it is important to 'never take public attention or credit for an oppressed group's process of liberation' (p. 117). Self-aggrandising behaviours are tantamount to this flaw in men's allyship practices.

Relationship with other (profeminist) men

Profeminist men allies' relationships to men in general, and other profeminist men in particular, are significant in several ways. Bishop (2002) asks allies to recognise that the members of the dominant group are often more willing to listen to other members of their own group as opposed to members of the oppressed group. Men allies can use their patriarchal privilege to amplify women's voices so that other men can hear them loud and clear, and in this way help 'break through others' ignorance of the oppression' (Bishop, 2002, p. 118). Profeminist men can take on leadership roles when working with other men on challenging MVDAAW. While taking on leadership roles with women is emblematic of men's domineering and appropriating tendencies, their leadership with other men is acutely needed. Men allies can expose and indict patriarchy in the lives of other men, and help them see how patriarchy causes damage in men's experiences and relationships too.

Men allies also need to prepare to challenge MVDAAW when they see it. This is not always easy, but is important nevertheless. Flood (2011b) makes some useful recommendations that men can use to intervene as bystanders in situations where they see other men being violent towards women, such as calling the police, being a witness, intervening verbally,

creating a distraction, expressing rejection of their behaviour and so on. Men allies can also resist other men's microaggressions against women, such as sexist jokes. Men can do this by not making sexist jokes themselves, and by letting others know that they don't appreciate sexist humour.

Men allies' alliances with other men allies are fundamental to profeminist politics because these can potentially be critical, constructive and creative spaces of educating each other about oppression and anti-oppressive ideas and practices, and unlearning oppressive attitudes and behaviours. Men allies can provide emotional support to one another as they understand oppression and its ravages in the world around them, examine the impact of patriarchy in their own lives, and come to terms with emotions such as shame and guilt. They can also allow for warm, intimate and rewarding friendships to organically grow among men. Crucially, men allies can hold other men allies accountable to a feminist agenda. Flood (2014) suggests that 'it should not surprise us that some men involved in the counter-hegemonic project of ending men's violence against women also are complicit in patriarchal masculinities' (p. 47). One can readily find several examples of such men allies in academic institutions or non-government organisations (NGOs). Linder and Johnson (2015) share the example of a university-based program for men to engage as allies to end violence against women where men participating in the program sexually assaulted two woman students. An ex-colleague of mine who worked on sexual violence and frequently waxed lyrical about reforming patriarchal masculinities also nonchalantly discussed his practice of buying and exchanging pornographic videos – of the kind that clearly objectified women – among his friends; they would compete over who could bring videos featuring largest breasts. These are not necessarily examples of 'men allies gone bad' but instead an illustration of the fact that profeminist men are not immune to patriarchal privilege and practices (Flood, 2014).

Besides engaging in blatant sexism and violence, men allies can also move away from effective allyship practices. Holding each other accountable to principles of feminism and to high standards of allyship and calling each other out when allies co-opt or dominate women's struggles instead of following their leadership emerge as important roles for men allies.

Politicising MVDAAW and resisting depoliticisation

Politicised approaches are essential to anti-oppressive social work practice (Baines, 2011). Sometimes anti-MVDAAW campaigns adopt a conciliatory tone towards men to become more acceptable to them. Such mainstreaming of these campaigns marks a shift away from social movement politics

of explicitly considering feminist analyses of MVDAAW as key to fostering change (Pease, 2017). Depoliticised approaches to challenging MVDAAW can look like campaigns that appeal to men through stereotypical notions about masculinity, for example campaigns which propose that men who sexually assault women fall short as 'real men'. These may also look like tokenistic campaigns such as 'Walk a Mile in Her Shoes' in which men march for a mile while wearing feminine-identified high-heeled shoes in order to bring attention to violence against women (Bridges, 2010); these campaigns engage with MVDAAW only superficially and may even symbolically reproduce gender inequality (Bridges, 2010). Focusing solely on men's behaviour without attending to the structural factors that create and maintain gender inequities depoliticises anti-violence efforts. For example, batterer intervention programs that approach social work practice with men perpetrators of violence from a largely clinical perspective and focus on behavioural approaches such as anger management will remain limited in their effectiveness on account of their constrained or depoliticised view of the problem. Therefore, profeminist men allies can politicise MVDAAW and resist its depoliticisation wherever possible. Politicising MVDAAW requires men allies to ensure that a 'feminist analysis remains as the central underpinning of violence prevention' (Pease, 2008, p. 13).

Conclusion

The allyship model of social justice offers a meaningful approach for social workers to address oppression through building respectful and conscientious alliances between members of different dominant and oppressed groups. In this chapter I have illustrated some aspects of allyship through the example of men profeminist allies' engagement with challenging MVDAAW. By critically understanding and strengthening their relationships with women and feminism, and with themselves and other men from a profeminist standpoint, men allies can contribute to challenging patriarchy and ending MVDAAW.

Allyship is messy and demands vulnerability. It can be productive and rewarding, creating opportunities for personal growth, interpersonal support and structural change towards equality. All allies are works-in-progress regardless of their years or level of engagement with anti-oppressive work. Social workers need not wait until they have 'figured it all out' before beginning their allyship journeys. A place of curiosity to learn about oppression (and unlearn oppressive attitudes and behaviours), openness to making mistakes and willingness to apologise and make amends to oppressed groups, and accountability to oppressed group members and following their leadership is a good place to begin.

Further readings

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