

Male allies and accountability

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An ally is a member of a privileged group who acts to challenge or dismantle that same privilege. Ally politics involves members of privileged groups taking action to undermine that same privilege: white people challenging racism, heterosexual people challenging heterosexism and homophobia, and of course, men challenging sexism.

Key elements of male allyship therefore include the following.

- Action: We take action in support of gender equality.
- Solidarity with women: We act with women rather than for women. We see our interests as aligned with women.
- Accountability to women: We try to work in gender-equitable ways, at the personal, interpersonal, and institutional levels.

It is better to see 'ally' as a verb than a noun. As a practice or role rather than as an identity. We cannot merely claim to *be* allies. To wear an "ally" badge or lanyard. Instead, we have to *act* as allies, to *do* allyship.

What does it look like to get it right?

In effective male allyship:

- We see the problem as grounded in systems and structures. We tackle the injustices and inequalities at the root of sexism and gender inequalities.
- We work *with* women, in collaboration, in solidarity.
- We see our own stake in change. We see dismantling systems of oppression as a way to liberate us all. We are involved because it is the right thing to do, and also because we see that men, like women, will benefit from progress towards gender equality.
- We acknowledge our own sexism, the privileges we may receive.
- We try to do the work of personal change, to 'walk the walk'.
- We work with and challenge other men, rather than focusing on how we are 'different from' and 'better than' other men. We support men's efforts at positive change.
- We hold ourselves accountable to women. We work in partnership with women.

What does it look like to get it wrong?

There are rookie mistakes for men to make. And to be clear, I've made all these.

- Seeing only other men, or bad men, as the problem
 - It is tempting for individual men to think that problems of sexism and men's violence against women are problems only of *other* men, men 'not like me'. But once we realise the wide range of forms that sexism, violence and abuse can take, that's not so easy.
 - In involving ourselves in this work, men must critically scrutinise our own attitudes and practices, and avoid 'exceptionalising' ourselves as fundamentally

better than other men.

- Taking over or dominating
 - Many men have been socialised to feel that we have the answers, we know what to do. We have been socialised to be confident in our own views, to take authority.
 - This can mean that when we start getting involved in gender equality and violence prevention efforts, we end up taking over. “Don’t worry ladies, I’ve got it from here.” We may neglect women’s voices and marginalise their work. We may expect to be given leadership, to be in the spotlight, while women do the low-status work. We may expect lots of praise and affirmation from women just for showing up. We may speak *for* women, not *with* them.
- Trying to ‘rescue’ women, the heroic knight
 - Another common mistake is to play the role of the rescuer: the heroic knight on a white horse, riding in to rescue the poor victim woman and save her from harm. Some men imagine that their role is to ‘protect’ women.
 - Now, this can come from an okay place, a care and concern for women and girls. But it is limited too. The ‘rescuer’ role treats women as weak, passive, and helpless. It ignores women’s agency, their power, their ability to act. The ‘rescuer’ role treats women as subordinate to men. It has a history in old notions of women as men’s property, where men protect their property from other men. The ‘rescuer’ role assumes that the rescuer knows what is best, rather than listening to women and to victims, and working in partnership with them.
- Waiting until you’re perfect
 - For men to play a positive role, we do not have to be perfect. We do not have to have achieved sainthood. We may have done dodgy things before, but ideally, we have acknowledged the harms we have caused, taken responsibility for them, made amends, and changed our ways.
 - And when men *do* get involved, even with the best of intentions, at times we will make mistakes, say the wrong thing. The bottom line is that we take responsibility for our actions and attitudes, recognise the hurt we have caused, and strive for a higher standard.
 - It’s better to start and learn along the way than not start at all.
- Performative allyship
 - Performative activism involves merely acting out the motions of activism to gain social status or social capital, rather than engaging in real action (Columbia Spectator). It means only doing allyship when people are watching. Performative activism involves self-publicising acts that are quick and superficial, with little or no genuine impact or significance. It contrasts with genuine activism, involving real efforts to make change (Walters, 2020).
- Talking the talk but not walking the walk
 - Now, personal change often is partial and uneven. But still, men have a responsibility to shift what we do, not just what we say.

Working accountably

A critical part of being a male ally is being *accountable*. Accountability can be defined simply as working in gender-equitable ways (See Flood 2018, pp. 92-96 – below).

Accountability is a key principle for this work, for compelling reasons:

- Women and women’s organisations often have a better understanding of issues of gender and sexism than men do (because of the typical gender gap in awareness).
 - The general point here is that when it comes to systems of oppression or inequality, those who are oppressed or disadvantaged have a much better understanding of the system than those who are privileged or advantaged. Privilege and injustice often are invisible to members of the dominant group.
- Men often are socialised away from being accountable, and towards male bonding and alignment with other men.
- Without women’s voices and leadership, even well-intentioned men and men’s groups may reinforce sexism and do harm.

As I wrote in my 2019 book, “The notion of accountability comes out of the politics of oppression and the politics of knowledge. It is based on two, overlapping foundational ideas. First, struggles against oppression should be led by those who are oppressed. Second, when it comes to systems of oppression or inequality, those who are oppressed or disadvantaged have a much better understanding of the system than those who are privileged or advantaged, as privilege and injustice often are invisible to members of the dominant group” (Flood, 2019, pp. 92-93).

Accountable practice can be seen as working at three levels: personal, relational, and institutional.

If male allies and their networks or organisations are acting *without* accountability, it might involve some or all of the following:

- *Individual:* For the individual men
 - Male advocates collude with sexism and violence.
 - Male advocates use violence and abuse themselves.
- *Interpersonal:* For the relations between the men and women in the group or network
 - Men dominate in meetings and networks.
 - Men’s voices are given priority over women’s voices.
 - Women do the work and men get the praise.
 - Women support and nurture men, and men do not do this for women.
- *Institutional:* For the group’s relations with women’s groups and networks
 - Men and men’s groups take action which is harmful for women and women’s groups.
 - Men’s groups take funding and resources away from women and women’s groups.
 - Men’s groups use strategies that make gender inequalities and violence against

women worse.

On the other hand, if male allies and their networks or organisations are acting *with* accountability, it involves the following:

- 1) *Personal*: Striving to behave in gender-equitable ways in our personal, everyday behaviour
- 2) *Relational*: Gender-equitable dynamics and processes in interaction
 - Including in whose voices are heard, who decides and who leads, who does the low-status work, whose efforts are given attention and praise, and so on.
- 3) *Institutional*: Lines of consultation and accountability
 - Structures of consultation and collaboration with women and women’s groups and others concerned with gender and sexual justice.
 - You talk to female colleagues and gender equality advocates. You seek their counsel and reflections.
 - Partnerships with women and women’s groups, rather than a separate, parallel field of work
 - Protection of ‘women’s space’, women-only, and women-focused programs.

Accountability as a key principle

Accountability is widely endorsed as a key principles in the work of engaging men and boys in building gender equality and addressing violence against women. For example;

- MenEngage, a global alliance comprising over 700 non-government organisations, country networks, and UN partners, has developed [accountability standards and guidelines](#) for its members.
- In [The Warwick principles: Best practices for engaging men and boys in preventing violence against women and girls in the Pacific](#), launched in Fiji in 2020, the first principle is: “Be accountable to the women’s movement in the Pacific.”
- In the guidelines [Supporting Best Practices: Guidelines for Funding Programs That Engage and Mobilize Men & Boys in Violence Prevention](#) (Canada, 2020), one of the seven principles is, “Work in partnership with, and be accountable to, feminist principles, women’s rights and gender justice organizations”.
- The UN Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls recently released the paper “[Men’s Accountability for Gender Equality](#)”, in December 2022. This emphasises that “achieving gender equality requires a significant shift from men’s mere engagement, to focussing on men’s accountability for gender equality to redistribute power and dismantle systems of male privilege” (Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls, 2023, pp. 1-2).

Sustaining your allyship

For male allies to sustain your energy and commitment, you will need personal strategies for strength and support.

Be bold. Develop a passionate ethic that you can and will contribute to social change. Get used to being political – to speaking up and making a fuss.

Learn a language for speaking about gender inequalities. Be able to describe how gender inequalities work, why they matter, and how they are a men's issue. Speak from the heart.

Find and build communities of support – through friends, groups, and networks. You're not John Wayne, and you can't go it alone.

Acknowledge your mistakes. Make amends where you can, and take responsibility for harmful behaviour.

Celebrate your successes.

Make use of resources. Do your homework, drawing on the wide range of resources for male allies.

Remind yourself of what you are for, not just what you are against. Find inspiring visions of gender equality and respect, and learn how you and other men (and women) will benefit from gender justice.

Resources for male allies

- [Resources on men's roles in building gender equality](#)
- [Resources on men's roles in building workplace gender equality](#)
 - This second collection focuses on workplaces in particular. Note that it includes a section on male allies in universities, towards the bottom of this page.

Resources focused on accountability

UN Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls, [Men's Accountability for Gender Equality](#), February 2023.

Flood, Michael. (2019). [Engaging Men and Boys in Violence Prevention](#). Palgrave Macmillan. (SEE pp. 92-96)

MenEngage [Accountability Standards and Guidelines](#)

MenEngage, [Being Accountable](#)

Pease, B. (2017). [Men as allies in preventing men's violence against women: Principles and practices for promoting accountability](#). Sydney: White Ribbon Australia.

COFEM. (2017). [How a Lack of Accountability Undermines Work to Address Violence against Women and Girls](#). Coalition of Feminists for Social Change.

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