

The Male Ally Countdown

Michael Kaufman

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SEVERAL YEARS AGO I WAS IN THE NATIONAL RUGBY LEAGUE (NRL) Hall of Fame in Australia where I was giving a talk to players, owners, managers, and staff. I posed the question: why should men in the NRL work to end violence against women? After all, I knew this was a key issue in male allyship, along with many other important workplace and social issues of women's rights.

I was expecting one of those "business case" answers. You know, the league looks bad when a player is charged with sexual assault or hitting his girlfriend. Or maybe they wanted to attract more women fans. You know, bottom line sort of arguments.

But here's what happened.

A man at the back stood up. He wasn't any taller than I am, but I wasn't sure his shoulders could squeeze through a normal door. He was, obviously, a player. So I posed the question directly to him. In a gentle voice, he answered, "Because it's the right thing to do" and without fanfare sat down.

For the past four decades, I've been talking, writing, and organizing for male allyship in support of women's rights, lives

free of violence, equal sharing of childcare and domestic work, and building workplaces and educational institutions that are diverse, inclusive and free of discrimination, harassment, and barriers to women.

And so it gives me great pleasure that almost every day I meet men like that rugby player or hear about another male allyship initiative in a UN agency, a government department, a corporation or professional firm, an NGO, a trade union, or a school.

However, I'm increasingly worried that male allyship might become another buzzword, a badge of honor with little content, a chest-thumping proclamation, or a well-meaning intention without the skill set or actions to back it up.

When it comes to male allyship, there are complex issues, nuances, cultural variables, and conflicts. That's to be expected from something that challenges eight thousand years of patriarchal institutions, ideas, and practices. It's to be expected because we're asking those like myself who, as a group, have benefitted from the male-dominated status quo to now question and subvert that from within. It's to be expected because we each have diverse relationships to patriarchal power...relationships shaped not only by our biological sex, but our personality, sexual orientation and gender identity, socio-economic class, race, physical and mental differences, and more.

The challenge of being an ally is magnified because some of the very skills we long ago learned in becoming men are absolutely dysfunctional and counterproductive when trying to be an ally.

Although there are no simple answers nor models that work seamlessly around the world, from my own work and from the initiatives of so many amazing colleagues, I believe there's a three-pronged pathway to allyship. Here is my 3, 2, 1 countdown to durable and meaningful allyship.

3. Build the Mind of an Ally

As we'll see, being an ally is ultimately about what you do, not simply your good intentions. However, in order to take effective action, you've got to do some heavy lifting to build the mindset of an ally.

a. Humility. Part of the traditional “real man” playbook—whether at work, in politics, in religion, or on the sports field—is to be in charge, have all the answers, and be confident you know what you're doing. Being an ally starts with the opposite: settling into a space where we still have everything to learn. That requires great humility.

b. Listen. The number one tool for allyship by men—and the path to accountability to women—is to listen to the words of women. This doesn't mean that women possess four corners of the truth, and certainly there are great differences in opinion, outlook, and experiences among women. But the long history of male-dominated societies includes the suppression, marginalization, and ridicule of women's knowledge and voices. Becoming an ally means realizing that women will hold you accountable for things you do and say, but also that you may be

lumped in with what other men have done. Listen without getting defensive; take it in. It's like reading a precious diary that has lain hidden for generations.

c. Empathy/Compassion. As we listen, and as we learn about the six big ideas below, we start to understand that the ways we men experience the world are often different from the experiences of women. Listening must not only be with our ears. It must be with our hearts. Listening with empathy and compassion, and taking action based on these murmurs of our hearts, is the pathway to deep allyship. And to add to the difficulty, even when we are fiercely challenging the actions and beliefs of some of our brothers, we must learn to employ empathy and compassion.

d. Reflect and question. As we listen and as we learn, we realize we're not simply dealing with issues, nor only with women's lives. We're up against our own assumptions both about women and ourselves as men. We need to face up to our own beliefs, biases, and behaviours.

e. Be okay with discomfort. Acting as an ally isn't a simple road. It's full of moments of discomfort as we challenge ourselves, as women challenge our actions and assumptions, as we reach out to other men with a positive challenge to change, and also as some men push back against us.

2. Learn the Six Big Ideas Every Male Ally Must Know

There is a lot to know.

a. Privilege. Membership in a socially dominant group—whether it’s because we’re men, or because of the color of our skin, our sexual orientation or gender identity, our religion, nationality, or ethnicity, our socio-economic class, or our physical and mental differences—confers a vast range of economic and social privileges. The thing is, though, these uneven privileges are invisible to those of us who enjoy them...they seem to simply be the way life is. Being an ally means learning about these invisible privileges (at least, invisible to us). It means learning about the barriers others face and challenging our own sense of entitlement. No, it doesn’t mean feeling guilty for our sex or color of our skin or the families we were born into. This isn’t about collective blame. But it is about awareness. It’s about learning to see what we weren’t aware of before.

b. Intersectionality. We all live our lives within a web of interlaced personal realities. A man might enjoy forms of privilege and relative power because of his gender but might also experience bias and discrimination because of other ways that he isn’t part of a socially dominant group. This not only makes our lives complex, but it also means the work of a male ally needs to take into account and respond to these complexities. That’s one reason we need to work hard to build the mindset of an ally.

c. Gender is also about men. Male allies often assume this is only a “woman’s issue.” But a gendered society like ours has coached us and pressured us, rewarded us and punished us from birth to fit into the binary definitions of manhood and womanhood. Although as a whole, men have gained advantages from this, it also takes a toll on us. Men have what I’ve called contradictory experiences of power: the very ways we’ve constructed a world of men’s power brings great costs to men ourselves.

How do we know this? Men die younger, are more likely to engage in self-harming, risk-taking behavior, be addicted to alcohol and other drugs, take our own lives more frequently, are more likely to end up in prison, are less likely to ask for help, have fewer intimate friends, and have a hard time feeling and expressing a wide range of emotions. What this means is that the work we do to join the gender equality revolution has the potential to bring great rewards to men.

d. The unequal workplace. Many male ally programs are focused on the workplace. That makes sense since most adults spend most of our waking hours in institutions that often embody the beliefs and prerogatives of patriarchy. In spite of progress in many countries, women still face enormous barriers in hiring and advancement; having their ideas heard; being respected as leaders; receiving equal pay; balancing their paid work with what, for most women, is a disproportionate share of caregiving and housework; and dealing with sexism and sexual harassment. Many women face additional barriers because of

racism, ageism, homophobia, and more. Male allies need to listen hard to learn about the challenges women still face.

In this context, there's a lot of talk about "the business case" for diverse and inclusive workplaces. This is based on evidence that such workplaces are more successful than those that are not—if nothing else, they are drawing on the insights and talents of all humans rather than only on men, or more accurately, a subset of men. However, we need to go beyond that. As my colleague Gary Barker says, this is about holding workplaces accountable because rights are rights. "We are fighting for the inherent worth and dignity that all individuals deserve."

e. Gender based violence. Men's violence against women is pandemic. Between a quarter and a half of all women have experienced some form of this: Sexual harassment at work, on the street, at school. Sexual assault. Stalking. Emotional and physical abuse at home. Murder. This affects not only women's well-being but affects their ability to study and to work. Domestic violence can have a huge impact at work: from lost work-time to an inability to concentrate, to workplace safety. Street harassment affects women's freedom of movement. Sexual harassment at work and in educational institutions remains a major issue, not merely in its more blatant forms, but in unwanted comments or physical contact or unwanted attention of a sexual nature. Male allies need to learn about the terrible extent of this violence, and the type of laws, policies, and personal actions required to respond to it.

f. Imbalance in our homes. One of the greatest barriers to women's advancement (including equal pay) happens not at school or work but in our homes. Although many families have made progress, in every country of the world women on average do far more domestic work and care of children and the aged. Many women interrupt their education or careers by years at home; many women lack adequate parental leave; many women make career decisions based on their domestic responsibilities. Women in many parts of the world don't have the right (or access to the means) to control their own reproductive choices. Male allyship requires learning about these issues and then fighting for paid parental leave (for all parents!) and support for measures that promote work-life balance, that support women's autonomy, and that recognize the responsibilities of parents and other caregivers. It requires making a personal commitment to bring equality to our homes by equitably sharing the physical and mental burdens.

1. Take Action

Allyship is not who you are or what you believe. It's what you do. Having the mindset and understanding the key issues forms the basis for thoughtful, intentional, and positive action. But men also need to develop the skill set that will give real impact to their actions.

a. Be a leader. Whether you occupy a corner office, work on an assembly line, conduct research in a lab, or are a student in the

classroom, you can be a leader for diversity and inclusion. Be intentional in your actions to create a welcoming, inclusive, and supportive environment for women and other people who've faced barriers and discrimination.

b. Support change. Being an ally is about supporting institutional and organizational changes. Make sure your organization is doing audits on the position of women and all issues of diversity and inclusion. Advocate for metrics and transparency both on progress and the challenges that lie ahead. At the workplace, push for improvements to policies on the hiring and advancement of women, diversity and inclusion, work-life balance, pay, support for parents and other caregivers, preventing and responding to harassment, and on the impact of domestic violence on the workplace. And just as importantly, press to make sure all staff and particularly managers are trained rigorously to implement these policies. Ensure these issues are part of performance evaluations. Celebrate and reward progress.

c. Don't be a passive bystander. Practice using the 5 D's to take action when you see harassment, hear sexist, racist, homophobic, and transphobic language or micro-aggressions, or see women's voices being ignored. What are the 5 D's? Direct action: speak up or take immediate action. Distract: do something to disrupt the situation. Delegate: alert others and ask for their help. Delay: follow up later if you think that will have maximum impact. Document what's happening. Being a male ally means finding your own voice and practicing your response to challenging situations.

d. It's important to speak out, but don't take over in ways that inadvertently silence women. And please, as women keep insisting to us, no mansplaining!

e. Reach out to the men in your organization, institution, or community. Find positive ways to challenge others. With compassion and empathy, create safe spaces for allyship and help build a community of male allies.

f. Support women's rights organizations in your community. And support initiatives and organizations to promote healthy ideals for men, that challenge binary gender definitions, that run fatherhood programs, and that work with boys to redefine our ideals of manhood.

g. Make a personal commitment to ongoing learning and change. Walk the talk not only at work but to creating true equality and fairness at home. Go beyond seeing yourself merely as an ally to someone else's cause. As Roxanne Gay writes about white allyship with Black people: "Black people do not need allies. We need people to stand up and take on the problems borne of oppression as their own, without remove or distance."

And that's it. There are all sorts of reasons to support women's rights and to speak out against abuse. But in the end, it's a moral imperative. It's about women's autonomy. It's about ending the eight-thousand-year affirmative action program for men. It's about unleashing new energies and ideas. It's about demolishing

the harmful gender binary and positively transforming not only the lives of women and girls, but of men and boys.

Simply put, as that rugby player said, the case for men to take up the challenge and work hard to become allies with women is because it's the right thing to do.