

The Importance of Male Allies: A Review of the Literature

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Though not always referred to as “male allies,” men have long been involved in various aspects of addressing gender equality. Abolitionist Frederick Douglass was a supporter for female suffrage back in the mid- to late 1800s. In the 1950s, the “husbands and boyfriends” of SWE Philadelphia Section members created the informal “Men’s Artillery” for companionship while waiting for section meetings to conclude, and in 1967, the more formal Men’s Auxiliary, Society of Women Engineers (MASWE) was established Society-wide to provide fundraising and other support for SWE members.¹ In the 1970s, men came together to advocate an end to violence against women, establishing influential groups across the United States. While the motivations of men advocating women’s rights throughout the years may differ, these examples show that men’s influence in addressing gender equality can lead to significant change.

Often when we think about male allies in the workplace, we consider men who mentor, sponsor, and advocate the fair treatment of women — and this is especially true in male-dominated industries and in places where women hold few high-level positions. Where men are the majority, their behaviors and actions are necessary to address inequities within their immediate spheres, but research shows that they also have the ability to serve as role models and spokespersons for other men.

We conducted a review of research literature to learn more about the effectiveness of male allies in improving gender equality in the workplace. While important research has been conducted by companies and organizations to inform the work of male allies,² only studies published in peer-reviewed publications or conference proceedings after 1998 that contained either findings, conclusions, or recommendations concerning men in roles as mentors, sponsors, or advocates in promoting women’s equality were included in this review. Using a keyword search,³ we sought relevant literature in the following databases: Academic Search Complete, JSTOR®, Business Source, and Google Scholar™.

We acknowledge the significant body of literature related to male allies' involvement in addressing race, LGBTQ+, and larger gender-equity issues (such as violence against women) and recognize that this research can inform the work of male allies in addressing gender equity in the workplace. However, we purposefully kept this review focused on the research available on male allies and gender equity/equality in the university and the workplace. Though we had intended to focus on gender equity in the STEM workforce, this proved too narrow a focus. The following literature review includes research that pertains to the role that men can take as allies, across different industries.

MALE ALLIES IN STEM

There is surprisingly little peer-reviewed research available that focuses on male allies for gender equity in STEM. Some studies from the National Science Foundation's ADVANCE program, a grant-funded initiative to increase the representation and advancement of women faculty in STEM, consider the impact of male ally programs. For example, North Dakota State University researchers conducted a review of the university's NSF ADVANCE-funded program of male faculty advocates, and concluded that developers of male allyship programs can benefit from the insights gained from gender-equity anti-violence programs, noting the similarities that such programs share (Anicha, Burnett, and Bilen-Green, 2015). A 2013 evaluation of the advocates and allies program at the university found that women faculty reported feeling more comfortable approaching men in the program for support. Women faculty also reported appreciation for the awareness of gender bias that the program offered their male colleagues and the encouragement to discuss the issue with other male faculty (Bilen-Green, Green, McGeorge, Anicha, and Burnett, 2013).

Bilen-Green et al. (2015) conducted a separate review of the implementation of the NSF ADVANCE-funded program of male faculty advocates and allies across five different institutions, noting that the endorsement and support of top university administrators are critical to successful implementation. Visible support among senior administrators adds credibility to the work while publicly recognizing those who participate.

In the professional sector, an international study of self-identified mentors in leading research groups in the field of optical engineering was conducted to understand the motivations and actions of mentors in their efforts to increase female leaders in engineering (Kodate, Kodate, and Kodate, 2014). Researchers found both male and female participants favored joint mentoring by a man and a woman for female engineers. They felt that this complementary model of mentoring provides more learning opportunities for both men and women, increasing the quality of mentoring for mentees.

MALE ALLIES AND EFFECTIVE MENTORING

Expanding the search beyond STEM and focusing on male allies as mentors, we found a 2002 review of sociological literature on the construction and maintenance of mentoring relationships for women in male-dominated fields in academia. Researchers noted that while senior faculty, most of whom are male, may need training to be effective in cross-gender mentoring relationships, a mentoring program should be part of a larger structural

transformation that includes addressing organizational reward systems, culture, and norms that make it difficult for women to persist (Chesler and Chesler, 2002). This aligns with studies indicating that a single diversity initiative alone is not enough to change the culture of an organization — see the article, “What Research Tells Us About Diversity Training,” also in this issue, for more discussion on this point.

A Catalyst study of women executives and CEOs of Fortune 1000 companies looked at women’s advancement into senior levels of leadership to understand the organizational barriers to advancement they experienced and the strategies used to overcome them (Ragins, Townsend, and Mattis, 1998). In the realm of male advocacy, a number of women executives noted having both male and female mentors, taking advantage of the different strengths each have in a mentoring relationship. Male mentors were found to be more influential in organizations, providing access to inner power circles, while female mentors were better at identifying and providing empathy regarding barriers to advancement. The findings from the study also support the need to raise the consciousness of chief executive officers and other senior officers about the importance of closing the gender gap, as organizational change requires the support and guidance of top management.

In a study of gender differences in social capital among business and political leaders (referred to as those in “elite positions”), Palgi and Moore (2004) discovered that more business leaders (both men and women) utilize several mentors from different hierarchical levels to help them advance in their careers. Additionally, female leaders reported having more mentors than their male peers. The researchers learned that for women leaders in business, having had a senior-level male mentor was associated with a broader range of networking contacts, with the greatest impact from mentoring seen early in their careers. However, in general, men reported a wider range of personal elite contacts than women. The exception to this was for women in social democratic countries where gender equality measures are strong. In these countries, women appear to have more access to elite networks than women in other countries.

A longitudinal study of lawyers, a profession where gender equity is an issue, used a social capital perspective to understand the career rewards associated with the mentoring relationships between lawyers in Ontario (Kay and Wallace, 2009). Researchers observed that both men and women lawyers were equally successful in securing mentoring relationships of nearly identical quality in their social network properties and embedded resources, but were unequal in capitalizing on those relationships. Women gained more advantage from having multiple mentors, even if they were exclusively male mentors, potentially connecting the protégés to a diversity of resources and opportunities that help them as they maneuver through different stages of their careers.

A survey of graduates from a large Midwestern university found that women in male-dominated industries see a greater return from a mentoring relationship with a senior male mentor in terms of compensation and career progression satisfaction (Ramaswami, Dreher, Bretz, and Wiethoff, 2010). The researchers also indicate that women in these industries need sponsorship from senior male mentors to a higher degree than their male counterparts. They suggest that mentorship is of greater value when senior males voluntarily

select female protégés for informal mentoring relationships rather than being paired through a formal mentoring program. Such voluntary selection indicates that senior leaders observe certain leadership qualities that their organizations value.

Guthrie and Jones (2017) studied the impact of relationship structure on mentoring functions in public accounting, a field where women are underrepresented in upper levels, and discovered that the origin of a mentoring relationship matters more to women protégés than the gender of the mentor. Interestingly, the majority of the females in the study who participated in informal mentoring relationships chose male mentors. The study showed that programs that support formal pairings may be significantly less helpful to female protégés than informal relationships, recommending that firms encourage more senior men to take the initiative in reaching out to potential female protégés.

MALE ALLIES AND EFFECTIVE CHAMPIONING

To understand the role that male allies can have in championing women, particularly when it comes to addressing inequities head-on and publicly advocating for women, we discovered a few interesting studies — particularly regarding the powerful role that men can have in effecting change in other men.

A study conducted by Czopp and Monteith (2003) that looked at confronting gender and racial bias among university students suggested that when nontarget group members challenge prejudiced responses, the individual who is confronted is likely to feel more guilt and less uneasiness than if confronted by someone from the target group. The authors theorize that this may be due to the unexpectedness of a nontarget confrontation, and that men may have a unique advantage in utilizing a confrontational approach to addressing prejudices. However, the researchers noted that participants were more responsive to confrontation about a racially biased response than a sexist response, indicating that combating sexism requires patience and perseverance.

In line with Czopp and Monteith's findings, Drury and Kaiser (2014) reviewed literature on male allies confronting sexism and found that when men speak up about sexism and confront it, they are taken more seriously than women, are less likely to experience social costs (e.g., derogatory remarks), and are more persuasive in convincing others (particularly other men) that sexism exists. Men are taken more seriously because confronting sexism does not seem to directly benefit them. Alternatively, when women confront sexism, they may be seen as acting out of self-interest, or "trying to benefit their gender group." Drury and Kaiser included a study involving men and women reading about either a male or female confronting sexism in the classroom in which researchers discovered that male study participants found male confronters more credible than the female confronters and viewed the perpetrators' actions as more sexist when confronted by a male.

A 2016 Australian study of high-level executives' effectiveness in championing women's programs and gender equity discovered that a leader's gender is complexly related to self-presentation, others' perceptions and expectations, individual choice, and organizational forces (de Vries, 2015). Analyzing interviews with both male and female CEOs, who were

recognized as advocates for gender equity, researchers noted overall agreement among those interviewed in the need for attention to resourcing, high visibility, strategic positioning of programs, persistence over time, and consistency of attention to the issues. However, they highlight the struggles that female leaders face in addressing gender equity in organizations where men dominate the executive ranks, including a reduced sense of belonging due to spotlighting their “outsider” status, the risk of having women’s issues marginalized when mentioned by a woman, and the personal cost of advocating change. Male advocates who utilize their positions of power among the male establishment to challenge the status quo seem to do so with little personal or professional cost, particularly when they appoint senior women to lead their change initiatives, effectively removing themselves from the active work required while making gender equity women’s responsibility. The researchers highlight the potential for complementary championing roles for senior men and women to lead change initiatives, which would reduce senior women’s vulnerability and utilize men’s power to influence other men to the cause, and the need to treat equity as an organizational mandate rather than a personal choice (particularly for men).

Another Australian study looked at mobilizing men and women toward gender equality as a common cause and found that positioning men as agents of change enhanced men’s support for gender equality (Subašić et al., 2018). The study, involving multiple experiments with university students and members of the general public, found that it is important to consider motivation when engaging men, noting that common-cause messaging (expressed through feelings of solidarity with women on issues of inequality), appears to be most effective for a male audience when championed by male leaders.

A subsequent study by Hardacre and Subašić (2018) extended the research of Subašić et al. (2018) to examine the role of leadership and influence processes in effecting social change. They found that common-cause messaging is effective, regardless of a leader’s gender, with both men and women audience members appearing to hold a more favorable and receptive view of leaders who speak of equality as a collective group interest. However, in line with the research of Subašić et al. (2018), male leaders were more effective than female leaders in mobilizing male participants, regardless of how the message was framed. The researchers theorize that a shared gender identity and dominant in-group membership, coupled with shared-cause messaging, suggests that men are doubly advantaged as mobilizers for gender equality as they are able to reach both men and women with such messaging.

WHAT RESEARCH DOES AND DOESN'T TELL US

The review of the research uncovered a few key points. The first is that there is a significant gap in the research around male allies for gender equity in STEM, particularly regarding sponsorship of women in the workplace. While companies are developing male-ally programs and working to encourage male advocates in their efforts to work alongside women in promoting gender equity, we do not have enough information to help us understand the impact that male advocates can have on this work.

Second, the research on male allies in supporting women of color in STEM is practically nonexistent. While research on male allies for women and male allies for people of color are available, there is no research to reference for those who want to increase men's support of women of color.

Finally, we attempt to pull together what the research tells us about effective male allyship:

- Visible support from senior leadership adds credibility to the work of male allies while publicly recognizing those who participate.
- Women benefit from having multiple mentors to help them advance in their careers.
- Women see a higher return from informal mentorships that are initiated by senior men who voluntarily select their protégés.
- Male leaders who publicly advocate gender equity within their organizations should avoid delegating the responsibility for action to senior women. Rather, male leaders should serve as complementary champions for the cause with women.
- Both men and women leaders should encourage common-cause messaging to promote solidarity on the issue of gender equity. However, this message resonates more for men when championed by male leaders.

We close this review with the observation that male-ally programs cannot be effective in isolation when cultural and structural changes are needed. In extension, as Subašić et al. (2018) note, addressing gender equity requires addressing issues in the domestic, professional, and political spheres: "To the extent that gender-based prejudice stems from and reflects unequal social relations, to eliminate prejudice and bias it is necessary to first change the social reality of gender inequality."

Endnotes

1. Although MASWE was disbanded in 1976 when men were allowed full membership in SWE, a scholarship created by its founders remains.
2. Catalyst's Knowledge Center offers a Research Series. NCWIT offers resources for male advocates and allies. The Center for Women and Business at Bentley University released a curated research report in 2017 on men as allies.
3. Keywords used in the search, individually or in combination, included: male, men, ally/allies, champion, mentor, sponsor, gender, sponsorship, sexism.

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