

# THE VOICE

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## ACCOUNTABILITY

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# Minimizing the Damage – Male Accountability in Stopping Men’s Violence Against Women

by Ben Atherton-Zeman, Maynard MA

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*My thanks to the many women who helped me write this.*

I have been working to end men’s violence against women for almost 20 years and I am doing this work largely because of the inspiration, teachings, and welcome of powerful, smart, feminist women. We men (myself included) owe it to these women, and to ourselves, to practice true accountability.

More and more men are (finally) joining the movement to end men’s violence against women. This is partly because of the efforts of a growing, multiracial movement of men, but it is mostly because of the efforts of women. The domestic violence movement has always invited and urged men to become involved – my gender is a bit slow to respond, but it seems as if we finally are responding.

However, the rush to involve men needs to be tempered with wisdom and caution. Certainly, male involvement can be a positive thing. I believe it is my gender’s responsibility to step up and confront the violence that our gender perpetrates. But many communities are reporting that we men who label ourselves “allies” are still a large part of the problem – acting out sexism and denying it, refusing to be accountable to women, or even perpetrating violence ourselves.

## Rescue Me

Certainly, many men who work to end men’s violence ARE accountable to women. I could fill this article with examples of men doing positive things across the globe – indeed, I am currently writing a “Men’s Monologues Against Violence” that highlights the work of some of these men. So many men I have met are admirable, helpful, moral, honest, and kind, but usually these men have been “raised” by long exposure to feminist women and to survivors of violence.

Why do men choose to do this work? For myself, it was because I had met (and dated) women in college who had been abused and controlled by previous partners. These courageous women shared with me stories of being sexually assaulted, physically assaulted, belittled, paid less, and having their opinions ignored in favor of male opinions. To say nothing of unwanted flirting, sexual harassment, sexist humor, and objectified images of women everywhere they looked.

Hearing what life was like for these women made me

mad. “Well, if you’re mad,” they said to me, “then you should do something. Not many men are speaking up about this.”

So I began volunteering, and later signed up to be an Americorps member for a \$4000/year stipend. I thought I was in heaven – getting to do this work I loved AND getting paid for it!

I pictured myself as a knight in shining armor, riding in to rescue the poor women. But it turns out that women don’t need a knight to rescue them. It turns out they need me to stop men’s violence in the world. It turns out women wanted me to talk to my own gender.

I went to a Women’s Studies conference in Connecticut and I was one of the only men at the conference. An older woman approached me and said, “I really appreciate the fact that you’re here. I want you to know that, from the bottom of my heart. But I want to ask you for something. Go home. Go home and talk to the men.”

## Setting the Bar Higher

When I receive positive appreciation (or even applause) for doing this work, I drink it in like a man dying of thirst. Yet I began to notice that I was often receiving overwhelming appreciation for actually doing very little.

My female colleagues have noticed this all along and are incredibly frustrated with the dynamic. One colleague in a conservative state has trained five men to be her co-presenters, if only to get her voice heard. Four of them are police officers. Lately, she has heard them saying things, making analogies, and telling the same stories she told them originally – and getting more credit for it! Once, in frustration, she called one of them and told him she had a training request and needed a “dick and a badge” to accompany her so that the audience would listen to her. She apologized to him for her rudeness, but I thought it was worth noting that the mere presence of a man standing next to her somehow gave her words more weight.

As a gender, we men are “Johnnies-come-lately” to the issue of domestic violence and sexual assault prevention. Yet when we do show up, we are often listened to more than women, praised more than women, and are paid more than women. Whenever we do the slightest thing,

we get a whole lot of credit – sort of like fathers in the 80s who were staying home with their children (“Wow, he changes diapers!”). Our abilities to accomplish what women have been doing all along seem impressive to many...especially ourselves.

What do we do with this phenomenon of men getting praise for doing very little? As men, I think it is our responsibility to not only acknowledge the praise, but encourage praise for women as well. We men need to acknowledge that we would not be here if not for smart, powerful, feminist women who did this work long before we did, and who taught us everything we know.

As I have already mentioned, if I say anything smart or insightful in this article, it is probably because a woman taught me that particular concept. If I do anything admirable or brave during my life, a woman probably inspired me to do it. And I need to acknowledge that publicly, not just here. My best teachers were survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, and daily sexism. My best thinking was taught to me by Phyllis Frank, Anne O’Dell, Suzanne Pharr, Ellen Pence, Jill Davies and many others, and I need to say that publicly.

Nevertheless, it is tempting to give huge credit to men for simply showing up. My own desperation to get more men involved makes me want to stand up and cheer whenever a man signs up to volunteer at a domestic violence program. Why isn’t my response, “Of course he’s signing up – it’s about time more men signed up!” Many women leaders have confided in me that their desperation for positive male involvement has led them to nominate a man to a Board of Directors or a Coordinated Community Response team, long before that man knew enough about the issue. These men will then make public statements that blame victims and undermine the work of women in that community.

### With Friends like These...

I was excited to meet “Roger” at a state domestic violence conference, and he seemed excited to meet me. Roger was passionate about challenging men to speak out against domestic violence – he eagerly told me about his idea to bring on more men. Roger had invited an NFL football team’s cheerleaders to do a routine for men – he said that scantily clad, sexy women dancing around would bring men to the event and then Roger could talk to them about male violence.

I asked him what the local DV program or the state coalition thought about his idea. “Can you believe it?” he replied. “For some reason, they

don’t like the idea! But I told them that I know what will reach men.”

“Roger,” I said, “If they don’t like the idea, you can’t do it! We have to be accountable to women’s leadership.”

“Yeah, but they aren’t really the experts on what will get men’s attention,” he replied. After the conference, I emailed him and repeated my assertion that he needed to be accountable to the women who had been leading this work in his state. In the end, he held the event with the cheerleaders despite local and state opposition from the same groups he was supposedly supporting.

After the event, I called the executive director of the local DV program to ask how things were going regarding this man. She sounded exasperated, and began talking about how much time dealing with him and with “Father’s Rights” guys took away from her running her agency.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “You know that Roger isn’t a ‘Father’s Rights’ guy, right? I mean, he may be doing some damaging things, but at least he’s not a ‘Father’s Rights’ guy.”

“What’s the difference?” she replied. “Both sets of guys

“...a magnificent paradox  
of tropical splendor and domestic  
violence in an exotic foreign land...”

## BELIZE SURVIVOR:

*Darker Side of Paradise*

By Nancy R. Koerner



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take time away from my agency. Both sets of guys make my job more difficult.” These men were conflated in her mind. She and her staff had sent out press releases, put out fires locally and statewide, and held meetings to deal with Roger, who was out there supposedly to “help women.”

In a different state, another friend of mine is part of what she describes as a wonderful group of men against violence that meets every other month. It consists of about 15 men and 2 women. But she is always the one who reserves the room; she is always the one who brings the food; she is always the one who sends out the reminder emails.

This group of men dutifully put an item on the agenda: “Sexism within this very group.” However, this agenda item kept getting put off in favor of other, more “important” agenda items.

The (male) chair of the group would sometimes “assign” action items to the two women members – the men’s group would then get the credit for the work the two women had done. As my friend puts it, “Shouldn’t it be the other way around?”

As more groups of men begin to organize to challenge men’s violence, more of these same groups rely on a few women to do most of the work. In a number of states, women have told me of individual men or men’s groups that begin taking on an anti-sexism project, but women end up doing the brunt of the work and receiving very little of the credit. Oh, the irony!

For myself, there have been many times where I have taken women’s thinking and posed it as my own. There have been many times where I have interrupted women in meetings, belittled women, and assumed they were not as smart as I was. When I worked at a domestic violence program in Maine, my supervisor was taking a little time at the copier. I assumed she was having trouble, and assumed that I could help her – I began explaining how the copier worked. She patiently said, “Actually, Ben, I have used a photocopier before, and am perfectly capable of doing this myself.”

Many times, when I am confronted on my own sexism, I become defensive and try to explain why the thing I did wasn’t sexist (as if that’ll make it all better). But I’ve learned (from women) that the important thing is not my intent, but the effect of my behavior. If we men claim to care about women, then we need to care about the impact of our actions, and not just our harmless intent, when confronted on our own sexism.

Of course, all men are socialized with sexism (racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, etc.) and it takes constant

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work to contradict all the messages we received as boys. However, some of the stories I was hearing about went beyond daily sexism and a lack of accountability. Some men have been told, “I don’t feel safe around you, as you do the work that’s supposedly for women.” These men do not change, convinced they are right. Additionally, some supposed male allies to women have been served with restraining orders, or have been tried and convicted of crimes of violence against women.

Your “star” man of this week might be convicted of abusing his wife next week. You do not know how we treat our partners at home – you only know how we treat you (remember how charming batterers are in court?). As more and more men become involved in this movement, more and more positive male role models will emerge. But more and more men will disappoint us—these disappointments will sometimes be public and embarrassing.

I was asked to say something for a church service at Pacific Lutheran University on the topic of involving men in stopping men’s violence against women. I wrote the following story for the service.

### The Rain and the River

What was once a beautiful, flowering prairie had become an arid desert. But the rain was determined to bring back the flowers, grasses, and the trees to the desert. Day after day, drop by drop, the rain worked to water the desert and make it green again.

Racing through the desert was a fast, powerful river. One day the rain visited the river and asked for help.

The rain said: “River, you have so much water. Would you help water the desert to bring back the grass and the trees?”

“I am too busy,” sniffed the river. “I have a job to do – I have to get to the ocean. Besides, watering the desert is rain’s work, not river’s work. Leave me alone – you’re bothering me.”

The rain was disappointed, so she went back to her job of watering the desert. But while she was talking to the river, she had fed the river some of her water. The river had risen a little.

Many seasons later, the rain visited the river again to ask for help. “Please, River – you have so much water. It’s a big job, bringing the grass back to the desert. I could really use the help.”

The river snorted. “Why do you keep bothering me? I feel attacked every time you say you need my help. Why is this my concern? I have to get to the ocean. Watering the grass is rain’s work – leave me alone.”

But the rain had again fed the river some of her water. The river’s waters had now risen, and he could see the desert a bit better – part of him felt badly that he wasn’t helping out.

The rain was, again, disappointed, so she went back to her job of watering the desert. But they had talked longer this time, so the river had risen even higher.

Some seasons later, the rain visited the river yet again. “River!” she said. I’m getting pretty tired of being the only one watering the desert. You really have a lot of water here. I could really use some help!”

The river had risen very high by then, mostly thanks to the rain. He listened to the rain’s words, and looked out at the desert. Some bits of grass had been brought back by the rain. Some trees had started to grow. But much more needed to be done.

The river liked to feel useful. He liked to have a purpose. Until now, that purpose had been to rush to the ocean. But in the desert, he saw that he could have a purpose here. He could be useful here.

“All right!” cried the river. “I want to help!”

And the river crashed out of his banks. He rolled over the dry sand of the desert. He rolled over the new grass brought back by the rain. It rolled over the new trees brought back by the rain.

At first, the rain was happy. Finally, the river was helping out! But pretty quickly, the rain realized that the river might be doing more harm than good.

“Slow down,” said the river. “You’re not watering the

desert. You’re flooding it!”

The river was shocked. “For so long you begged me for help and now that I’m here you criticize me? I have half a mind to go back and leave you to do this all by yourself!”

How does this story end? I believe that, in a very real sense, the ending will be determined by the men who have pledged to work to end men’s violence. We are the river – we mean well, but we have done some damage.

The Hippocratic Oath taken by doctors’ states, “first, do no harm.” I am not sure this is possible in this case, as the very same men who are part of the solution are also part of the problem. I think that we, the river, have already overflowed the banks. As men, we will do some damage despite our best efforts. I believe the key is to remain open to feedback, to remain accountable to women, to listen without (or despite) defensiveness.

The title of this article, “Minimizing the Damage,” might seem negative, but the feedback I have received from so many women is overwhelming. Clearly, across the country many men are getting involved and doing wonderful things. Clearly, many of these same men are also lacking in accountability to women leaders.

However, many women (and some men) have involved men in their communities in ways that have worked very well. These leaders seem to follow a five-step process that I wish to outline here.

## **Involving Men and Keeping Us Accountable: A Five-Step Process that Just Might Work**

### ***Step One: Educate us about male violence***

This is the work that many women are doing already – whether they are community educators in domestic violence programs, or hotline workers that are asked, “So, what do you do for a living?” and end up educating the stranger who happens to be sitting next to them on the bus. Some of these education programs are aimed at men—the Mentors in Violence Prevention Project, the Coaching Boys to Men campaign, and many others. Often, the most effective way to reach men is simply to feature the voices of survivors themselves. I believe that once men have truly listened to the voices of survivors, and they have survivors in their lives, they will not be able to NOT do this work.

### ***Step Two: Ask us to do something small, something simple***

The White Ribbon Campaign in Canada urges men to wear a white ribbon as a pledge to “never commit, con-

done, or remain silent about men's violence against women." The Men's Resource Center for Change and other groups ask men to sign their names to a similar public pledge. College campuses often encourage men to participate in events such as "These Hands Will Not Hurt" or "Walk a Mile in Her Shoes."

None of these efforts are very difficult, and some men will complete these projects and do nothing else. Yet for others (as it was for me), it will be the first step in a lifetime involvement.

### ***Step Three: Ask us to learn more***

Ask us to sign up for your agency's volunteer advocate training (if such trainings accept men). Some trainings are 40 hours or more. Men will use that time to learn about the issue, meet others who are working for the same thing, and begin to build relationships of accountability with feminist women leaders.

Some colleges offer classes on men's violence against women, or will give credit for men (and women) to attend an agency's volunteer training. This helps busy students and folks who do not yet prioritize these issues in their lives.

Not all of the men who agree to the Step Two activities will agree to attend a volunteer training. Many men will help; however, only "when you need it." These men are still important – keep them on a mailing list and ask them to help as often as they can (manufacture things for them to do, even). Some states are developing statewide Men's Initiatives and have active email lists – Minnesota and Massachusetts among them. For many men, continued involvement with Step Two level activities will someday get them to "graduate" to Step Three and make that bigger commitment.

Most of our movement's volunteer trainings cover more than just the surface level. My first volunteer training was where I learned that, for example, battering was not simply an individual "bad" man committing physical abuse because he was sick or crazy. I learned that the real root of battering is a society that favored my gender – sexism, racism, homophobia, rigid gender role expectations, institutionalized power, and privilege of some groups over others. Batterer, I learned, was one person choosing to establish a pattern of coercive power and control over another. Sexism and other forms of oppression influenced this person's choice, but in the end, it was that person's choice to abuse.

It was at this point that I realized that I had much more in common with these "bad men" than I was comfortable with. It was at this point that I realized that some of my behaviors in college, for example, were certainly on the

continuum of violence. The men in your volunteer trainings might be realizing the same things – this might scare them off, or it might bring them to a deeper level of commitment to challenge violence not just in the world, but in themselves as well.

### ***Step Four: Mentor us***

Invite us to conferences – what an inspiring place to meet our movement's founding mothers! To meet others who are passionate about doing this work! It was at conferences (especially the NCADV conference) where I met and listened to Suzanne Pharr, Ellen Pence, and many others.

Conferences might feel scary at first to these men – they did to me. I had heard the stereotype of "man-hating feminists" and worried about how I would be accepted. Yet from the very first conference, I was more than accepted – I was invited, encouraged, and welcomed. Yes, when I said or did something sexist, I was called on it. Initially I reacted with defensiveness and felt attacked, but after a while, I realized this feedback was a gift, and now I try to treat it as such.

Some men new (and not new) to this work might react to feedback with defensiveness. Hopefully, these men will get over it, perhaps with support and encouragement from other men who do this work. But if, by Step Four, men are not willing to take feedback from women's leaders, their involvement and leadership potential should be reconsidered.

### ***Step Five: Encourage us to take leadership***

We may *think* we are ready to take leadership right from the beginning! However, we should probably wait to do so until we know more about the issue. Even at this point, we will still make mistakes, but by now, we have set up a relationship of accountability with feminist women.

The leadership we take might even be to do the same educational work that taught us back at Step One—so the steps actually become a cycle! Moreover, the Step One activities might bring more men on board, at which point we can ask them to do some Step Two activities, and so forth.

## **The Future**

The "2008 Call To Action Statement By Those Aspiring To Be Allies to Women of Color Advocates and Activists" states the following:

We all agree...that one does not get to label oneself an ally nor should one be fooled into believing that the journey to becoming an ally is finite. In fact, as one

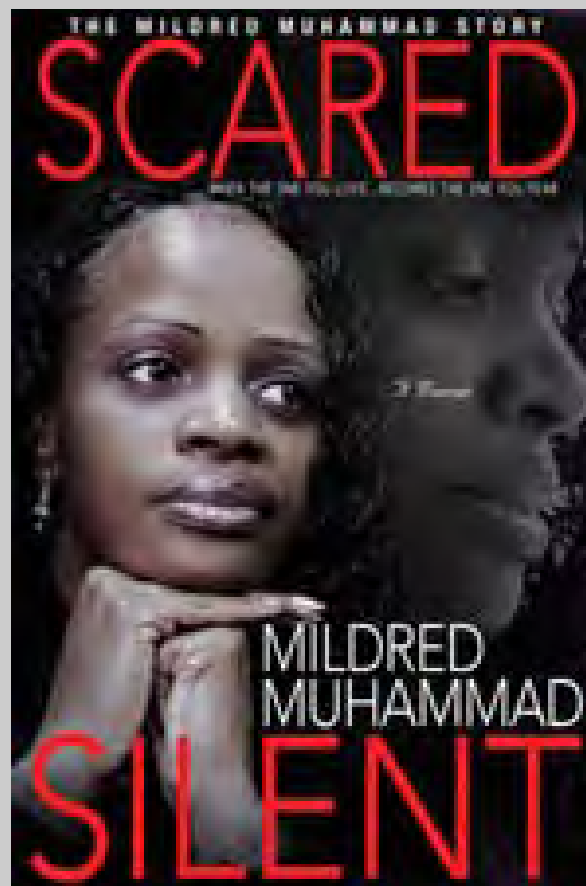
shared, “I was always told by women of color that my ally status ‘expires every day at midnight!’” We must strive to work at it on a daily basis.

It is my honor to be an “aspiring ally” to women who have been victims of male violence. I am willing to work on being a better ally – being a better man – every day. I know that I have made mistakes, and I am sure I will make more, but I will keep at it.

More and more men are going to become involved in this movement. As this happens, we in the movement will use our collective wisdom to not only keep them involved, but also see to it that these men are accountable to women’s leadership. It is simplistic to believe that these five steps will “accountability-proof” the men who are coming into our movement. Some men will enter our movement, learn from women, and not “take over” – they will do the right thing right away. Yet many men are entering this movement and becoming part of the problem, while trying to become part of the solution. With this article, I am trying to help minimize that.

Michael Kimmel and Tom Mosmiller have written a book called *Against The Tide* about pro-feminist men in the United States. I am from New England, and I know that tides are powerful, but I also know that they can change. I envision a tide of men who have taken advocate trainings, who have listened to battered women, rape survivors and their advocates, who are accountable to our own sexism, who listen and get past defensiveness when we are challenged. Once this tide has changed, the men who sue our shelters, who say they are for “Father’s Rights” when really they are for the suppression of mothers, and who refuse to be accountable to women will be going against that tide.

For a long time, my gender has been the source of most violence. Now that we are getting involved in being part of the solution, we are bringing our own sexism as we get involved. Nevertheless, the tide can also change. With some work, men will become involved in greater numbers, while practicing what we preach. We are working on a tidal change to stop domestic abuse, sexual assault, sexual coercion, sexism, racism, homophobia and heterosexism, transphobia, anti-Semitism, ableism, classism, and all forms of injustice. Those tidal forces we are shaping can create a culture where violence is unacceptable, where hypocrisy is unacceptable, and where we men challenge violence and sexism in ourselves as vigorously as we challenge it in others.



Before he was finally arrested, Mildred Muhammad’s ex-husband, who was known as the DC or Beltway Sniper, would be linked to twenty-seven shootings—seventeen of them fatal. Many members of law enforcement told Mildred they were convinced she was Muhammad’s primary target. Prosecutors in Muhammad’s first trial, as well as defense attorneys for Lee Malvo, John’s young accomplice, put forth similar theories concerning Muhammad’s motivation. They thought that John Muhammad was shooting innocent men and women near where Mildred lived and worked because he was ultimately planning to murder Mildred. When he did so, he wanted it to look like random violence. This was his plan! With Mildred out of the way, he thought he would be able to get custody of their children and go on with his life. John Muhammad and Lee Malvo both acknowledged that their reason for being in the DC area was to “pick up” and kidnap Mildred’s children. A law enforcement official told Mildred that when Muhammad was arrested, one of the first sentences out of his mouth was, “It’s Mildred’s fault.”

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