

What Motivates Men to Champion Gender Diversity?



Allies come from a variety of experiences and backgrounds, yet the first challenge is for men to recognize that sexism exists.

By Sandra Guy, SWE Contributor, and Anne Perusek, SWE Director of Editorial and Publications

Men become champions of gender equity in many number of ways, but research shows that a sense of fair play, empathy, and life experiences are key contributors. Especially for men with a strong sense of fairness and empathy, certain life events and occurrences — such as having a first-born daughter, switching stereotypical parenting roles, having been marginalized in some way, or working under a woman’s leadership — can activate an awareness of sexism and commitment to gender equity.

With these points in mind, we are left to consider: Do men raised to believe in gender equity, or whose lifestyle changes prompt them to become equity advocates, act on those beliefs in the workplace? Or will men become more open to workplace gender equity when they (themselves) benefit from it? Or, is equity in the workplace a combination of both incentives and enlightenment? Researchers concede there is no single silver bullet to ensuring men’s advocacy for gender equity in the workplace.

ESTABLISHING THE GROUNDWORK

A helpful place to begin exploring these questions is the article “Allies against Sexism: The Role of Men in Confronting Sexism,” by Benjamin J. Drury, Ph.D., a Google researcher, and Cheryl R. Kaiser, Ph.D. (2014), a psychology professor at the University of Washington in Seattle. Providing a review of the social science literature on male allies available at the time, they cite some of that research to define an ally as “someone who aligns with a disadvantaged group by recognizing the need for further progress in the fight for equal rights” and who then works alongside the disadvantaged group in the search for justice.

Among the highlights from their review is the finding that men are less likely than women to recognize both interpersonal and organizational forms of discrimination against women, and that they fail to recognize the severity of sexism when it occurs. For example, a study by Peter Glick and Susan T. Fiske (1996) revealed that men are

less sensitive to and cognizant of subtle forms of sexism, such as when a man interrupts a woman who is talking; benevolent offers of help to women employees when no help is needed; or a woman being asked to take notes in a meeting when it’s not her job. These less conspicuous expressions of sexism take a heavy toll on women, especially those with low self-esteem, because while these behaviors appear less overt or threatening, they are unfair, restricting, and condescending.

Certain men, however, do recognize that there is unfairness in the status quo, and consequently are more likely to acknowledge discrimination against low-status groups, including women. These men reject so-called “legitimizing” beliefs that are used to justify the current state, such as the view that engineering is a meritocracy; that people receive promotions and earn rewards solely because they have worked hard and proved themselves to be exceptional individuals; or that biases and structural systems are irrelevant. Questioning or rejecting these beliefs is significant, as pointed out by Adams, Tormala, and O’Brien (2006), because doing so undermines the high-status group members’ belief that they deserve their standing.

When men self-identify with groups who have experienced unfair treatment due to race, sexual orientation, or other demographic categories, they may be more inclined to perceive and acknowledge sexism. Research also shows that men who have been marginalized may be more attuned to the way groups are treated differently and, therefore, are more likely to reject certain beliefs and structures to instead become allies.

Finally, nice guys qualify as allies, too. Research by Gervais, Hillard, and Vescio (2010) found that men who are motivated by and believe in social responsibility — in being helpful and considerate of others — may develop an ally identity. The researchers discovered that the more such men embraced notions of social responsibility, the more likely they were to perceive another man’s sexist statement as unacceptable. Referencing this study,

Drury and Kaiser suggested that men who are particularly concerned with the well-being of others may also be willing to ally with women to fight against unfair treatment.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DAUGHTERS

Indeed, people's outlooks on gender, diversity, and fairness are complicated. How these various outlooks play out in the workplace and society overall occupies a great deal of attention on the part of Iris Bohnet, Ph.D. A behavioral economist at Harvard University, Dr. Bohnet was appointed academic dean of the Kennedy School of Government in 2018. She is also a professor, director of the women and public policy program, and co-chair of the Behavioral Insights Group at the school.

As the author of *What Works: Gender Equality By Design* (2016), Dr. Bohnet noted in an interview (Salario, 2016) with the publication *Metro*, "There's research showing that male politicians and CEOs who are fathers of daughters are more gender equal

than other men or fathers who don't have a daughter. So I do think that whole question of empathy and walking in other people's shoes is very helpful." (See the sidebar focusing on her book, *What Works: Gender Equality By Design*, later in this article.)

Other research, publicized widely recently because of NBA basketball star Stephen "Steph" Curry's crediting his daughters for his women's-equity advocacy, concludes that men whose first child is a girl are more likely to support policies that promote gender equity than men whose first child is a boy.

Curry, a Golden State Warrior point guard, wrote in *The Player's Tribune* in August 2018 that his experience as a father of a daughter means that "the idea of women's equality has become a little more personal for me, lately, and a little more real." He also wrote that, "every day — that's when we need to be working to close the pay gap in this country. ... And every day is when the pay gap is sending the wrong message to women about who

How Policy Can Contribute to Gender Equality



Iris Bohnet, Ph.D., is academic dean and a behavioral economist at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and author of *What Works: Gender Equality By Design* (2016). <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674089037>

Dr. Bohnet cites research delving into India's 1993 Constitutional amendment that mandated one-third of village leaders in a district had to be women — and that the villages would be picked randomly out of a hat at each election cycle.

The effects were widespread: The likelihood that a woman would speak up in a village meeting increased by 25 percent; parents were more likely to want their daughters to study past secondary school; and villagers who had exposure to at least two female chiefs in West Bengal overcame their initial bias against women as leaders and rated male and female leaders equally, according to research on the outcome. Women were more likely to run against men for election if a council seat had been reserved for a woman in the previous election, a study in Maharashtra state showed.

And girls who observed female village chiefs spent less time on household chores and wanted to marry later. Researchers Chattopadhyay and Duflo, Ph.D., wrote about the results in "Women as Policy Makers: Evidence from a Randomized Policy Experiment in India," *Econometrica* 72(5) (2004). [Excerpted from *What Works: Gender Equality by Design*.]

they are, and how they're valued, and what they can or cannot become."

Contributing to our understanding of the ways family dynamics may shape views on gender equality is a study by Sharrow, Rhodes, Nteta, and Greenlee (2018). Their research, "The First Daughter Effect: The Impact of Fathering Daughters on Men's Preferences for Gender Equality Policies," revealed that men whose first child is a daughter are more likely to express support for gender-equity policies. They found that the birth order is particularly important, because men whose first child was a boy did not express a shift in their views. Their research also suggests that as new fathers, men attach greater significance to the events and information they receive as they undergo parenting experiences with a firstborn child who is female than with subsequent daughters, or when their only daughter follows later in the birth order.

A similar study conducted in the U.K. showed that men who have daughters — not necessarily firstborn — are less likely to agree with a "traditional gender division of work." Conducted by Borrell-Porta, Costa-Font, and Philipp (2018), this research found that fathers' attitudes change once their daughters reach school age. Fathers of daughters in secondary school are even less likely to hold traditional gender views than fathers of younger-age daughters. The research suggests that as parents become increasingly aware of what is at stake for their daughters, they may adjust their gender-norm attitudes. For fathers, indirect exposure to disadvantage has the potential to change their views on gender equity. As the authors note, "We conclude that gender norm attitudes are not stable throughout the life-course and can significantly be shaped by adulthood experiences."

THE ROLE OF AWARENESS

Men with a high awareness of gender bias were more likely to view women's workplace exclusion as a competitive disadvantage for corporations, according to a 2009 Catalyst study titled "Engaging Men in Gender Initiatives: What Change Agents Need to Know."

These highly aware men tend to reject traditional male norms, especially the one that calls for men to "avoid all things feminine," and are more

likely than their less-aware peers to express admiration for women co-workers, the study showed.

The norms — avoid all things feminine, be a winner, show no chinks in the armor, and be a man's man — are deeply ingrained and start at an early age, the study revealed. Men then police one another to keep the norms going, criticizing those who deviate with pejorative terms such as "wimp," "sissy," and "whipped."

Despite these powerful norms, the researchers theorized that when men experience gender norms as a restrictive barrier in their own lives, they may be more apt to see them as a barrier in women's lives, too. Men who had experienced pivotal moments in their lives from having violated a masculine norm were more likely to become proponents for gender equity, the study found.

One man described how his co-workers talked about him disparagingly when he sought a part-time position to help his spouse with child care. "When I came back (full-time) a year or two after, they asked if I was still breast-feeding," he told the researchers.

Men who have female mentors also say they've had their eyes opened to gender equity issues, the study revealed. "When I was working for [company X], I had some real strong, real assertive females ... in my organization, in my direct team," a Dutch man told the researchers. "We were good friends ... It was all very well-intentioned, but they were honest with me ... about my issues ... about my behavior... [They were] really good role models."

Finally, men with a strong sense of fair play were more likely than those without this mindset to be aware of gender bias, the Catalyst study showed. Those with a strong sense of fair play had greater concerns about inequality in general, such as being concerned with extreme poverty and feeling burdened by the lack of fairness in the world, the study found. Such men were more likely to speak up publicly for their ideals of fairness and equity.

And, intriguingly, they were also more likely to have firsthand experience with marginalization or exclusion, the researchers discovered. The Catalyst researchers conclude that these men's commitment to fairness stemmed from very personal and emotional experiences.

In fact, being marginalized led Robert E. "Bob"



Robert E. Moritz

Moritz, global chairman at PwC and an IM-PACT 10x10x10 Champion committed to achieving global gender equality, to an “aha” moment, which he described in an interview. (An initiative of UN Women, IM-

PACT 10x10x10

aims “to engage governments, corporations and universities as instruments of change positioned within some of the communities that most need to address deficiencies in women’s empowerment and gender equality and that have the greatest capacity to make and influence those changes.”)

The “aha moment” began when Moritz was assigned to work in Japan. He said he “definitely saw, felt, and experienced what it felt like to be a minority — that part of the world being more homogeneous with set expectations of male vs. female in the workplace.”

“Issues of people who experience the negative side of [those expectations] became informative in terms of my thinking and behaviors — as well as the need to overcome these biases,” Moritz said.

He said he was most uncomfortable because he didn’t speak Japanese and yet he knew that, at times, his co-workers were talking about him. “I was on the outside looking in,” he said. “You feel isolated. You feel discriminated against. You could understand without changing your gender or skin color what it felt to be in the minority.”

Moritz extrapolated his experience to the broader issues of diversity and inclusiveness. He said he came to wonder: “Do women feel they are part of the group at work? Are they in the position of others talking about them without them being in the room?”

Moritz said his second “aha moment” occurred as he was going through a divorce, when he said nothing to anyone at work and had to make his children’s meals, oversee their homework, and get

them off to school. “You’re putting yourself in the shoes of women who do that regularly, in terms of the challenges they are dealing with,” he said. “How did it feel to leave work at a certain hour because my obligation in work and life was more than I had dealt with previously?” Moritz said. “How did I manage the expectations inside the organization? I never shared it with anybody. Therefore, I was not able to get help from others perhaps experiencing the same thing. So how do you have an environment in which people can open up — about work, life and flexibility?”

ADVOCATES FOR CHANGE

Moritz said his organization requires men to be “sponsors” rather than “mentors” — a key differentiator because it requires the sponsor to become more actively involved by advocating for the woman being sponsored. “A sponsor creates an opportunity and feels an obligation to see it through,” Moritz said. “So, for example, a male sponsor would go to the leadership team and say, ‘I think Susan (or Sally or Cheryl) has the right skills for this job or this promotion. Why are we not considering that? I am happy to support her, not only to get the role, but to make sure that she is successful and to help her deal with obstacles that might get in the way in terms of anyone who would change roles.’”

Moritz noted, “Women feel supported in that regard — that the backbone of the organization is behind them,” acknowledging that setting the right tone is crucial. “The leadership’s responsibility is to show that diversity enhances the organization and the individuals within the organization,” he said. “It has to be portrayed as a ‘win-win.’ You have to (explain it) as a business case.”

Another view of what it means for men to be allies of women in the workplace, with women helping men along in the quest, is the basis of an upcoming book — yet to be titled — following up the initial volume, *Athena Rising: How and Why Men Should Mentor Women*. The authors are David G. Smith, Ph.D., associate professor of sociology in the national security affairs department at the U.S. Naval War College, and W. Brad Johnson, Ph.D., professor of psychology in the department of leadership, ethics, and law at the United States Naval Academy, and a faculty associate in the Graduate

School of Education at Johns Hopkins University.

They assert that allyship encompasses both interpersonal skills — listening, empathizing, and engaging in reciprocal, collegial relationships — and taking a public stance in the workplace, calling out sexist behavior, sexist comments, or salary discrepancies that harm women, Dr. Johnson said.

“It’s not enough [for a male ally] to be kind and competent interpersonally,” he said. “Women also need public allyship. It’s being the guy who calls things out when something is unjust, including sexist behavior and comments from other men. If the man who’s an ally sees discriminatory policies that put women behind or make it tougher for them to step away from family obligations, he steps up to remedy that.” Explaining this approach, “There’s more skin-in-the-game when you’re deliberately role modeling for other men and policing the behavior of other men,” Dr. Johnson noted.

Dr. Smith said managers should beware of men who aren’t legitimate allies. They include predators, or those who would take advantage of women, especially young employees as they start their careers; the men who talk a good game of being a “male feminist” only to benefit themselves; and those who make hostile and sexist comments to male-only groups while spouting feminist support when around women or mixed-gender groups.

New employees could seek out more senior women in management to get advice on the real versus the phony allies. In fact, it should be women who decide who their allies are, the authors say. “You’re an ally when women call you that,” Dr. Johnson said. “Don’t proclaim it. That’s very presumptuous.”

How does the process start — and develop? It starts with peer relationships and work friendships — relationships that develop and build with trust. “We need the average man in the workplace to be less afraid of engaging deliberately and publicly with women and not be afraid of the #MeToo movement,” Dr. Smith said. “You have to set boundaries and have impulse control,” the authors said. “It is never in a woman’s best interest for a man to sexualize a relationship at work. That’s never going to be useful for her. You have to use good judgment.”



Co-authors David G. Smith and W. Brad Johnson.

Consistent with other research, the co-authors note that men who become allies are, in many cases, influenced by either a personal connection, such as seeing a friend, colleague, or family member being discriminated against, or a life event in which they found themselves in the minority. “It gets in touch with their sense of fairness and justice,” Dr. Johnson said. “It’s important to who they are.”

Corporations can support such accountability in their workplace policies, but women also can play a role, the authors said. “Give guys feedback,” Dr. Smith said. “For men who are asking, women can play a role in helping [men] understand appropriate ways of being allies.”

For men who default to helping women they find attractive, women or managers can call out the behavior. “The question needs to be asked: ‘How does that behavior bias and influence your work?’”

Women can also invite men to attend women’s leadership conferences to learn more about issues of importance. “It starts with awareness,” Dr. Johnson said. And it continues with communication. “If you don’t have the ability to ask questions, you never have the opportunity for someone to say, ‘Oh, now I get it,’” Dr. Smith said. ✨

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