

RESEARCH ARTICLE | NOVEMBER 17 2023

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AIP Conf. Proc. 3040, 060011 (2023)

<https://doi.org/10.1063/5.0175759>



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AIP Conf. Proc. (November 2023)

Being an Ally

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Abstract. This paper provides information, suggestions and resources for men, specifically cis-white men, to become allies, supporters and followers in the fight for equity and inclusion of women and underrepresented groups in physics in science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields in general and in society as a whole.

INTRODUCTION

Allies are clearly important, even essential, for the successful pursuit of social justice, advances of marginalized groups, diversity, equity and inclusion efforts. Allyship [1] is a commitment to unlearning and re-evaluating basic concepts and actively and proactively working with underrepresented and marginalized groups to affect significant change in systems. Being an ally does not require assuming different identities but rather declaring solidarity.

The support and active participation of men, specifically cis-white men [2], as allies is particularly important because many of the problems women and underrepresented groups face come from this demographic group. In physics-related jobs—whether in academia, laboratories or industrial settings—men hold most leadership and membership positions. Consequently, they are frequently in good positions to affect positive and lasting change to the current culture, in both day-to-day settings and the big picture.

Increasing diverse participation in physics is in everyone's interest, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, race or any other characteristic that makes their involvement and experience in physics more difficult and less equitable. Gender inequity is not a “women's issue.” Addressing it is a societal imperative, and thus men must actively participate in the dismantling and rebuilding of the system to remove any semblance of privilege and inequity. For men to become effective and supportive allies, they must be able to educate themselves on issues of misogyny, sexism and general discrimination based on sex and gender. Many men are oblivious to issues of harassment and inequitable treatment of women and underrepresented groups in physics and in society in general.

This paper provides some ideas, tools and directions for moving from allies to accomplices and co-conspirators of all those who identify as women, as they sit at different axes of intersectionality and pushing for social justice. The discussion of how to ameliorate and redress the underrepresentation of women in physics requires an understanding of the complex societal reasons for the suppression of equity in the field. It is critical to understand that these disparities do not simply materialize in the adult population (college and above). Underrepresentation of women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) starts very early. Until around fifth grade, girls and boys are on par when it comes to self-perception of their abilities, that is, intelligence, leadership and confidence in themselves. Girls' perception of their intelligence diminishes as they get older [3]. It is not biologically determined. Their confidence and leadership self-perception declines [4] somewhere between middle and high school levels.

Finally, this paper presents some of the research conducted in the past few years about the participation of women in physics throughout their lives [5, 6], and the hurdles they must clear. Most especially, the paper focuses on what men must do to push for the required and necessary changes in physics. It also includes what men need to do to support the women who encounter unjust barriers [7] and those who lead the efforts to modernize our field [8] and make it equitable, inclusive, supportive, diverse, and welcoming to all those who choose to participate and incorporate physics into their lives.

HOW TO BE AN ALLY

- Awareness is only the beginning to affect change; allies must be more than educated.
- Just as for women, black, indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) of all genders and intersectionalities live with systemic injustices that pervade our societies, the privileged among us cannot pretend that we are not aware of the biases and inequities that exist around us.
- To go beyond passive support and into active involvement takes courage. Activity exposes one's ignorance, requires engagement that may cause discomfort, exposes the fear of saying the "wrong" thing, using the "wrong" language and partaking in confrontations.
- **Allyship is not about feeling guilty for one's own privileged position, but about wanting to help.** Being an ally requires more than sympathy to the cause and more than understanding of the problem, although both are imperative, they are only the precursors to true allyship. **Being an ally requires action.** What is essential is taking responsibility for how things are and actively affecting and contributing to real change. Allies must be fierce and willing to take action to upend the status quo [9].
- Some people use words such as comrade [9] or co-conspirator [10] to emphasize that allyship is not a strong enough word. The sentiment is real, since allyship traditionally refers to the sympathies and understandings rather than the active challenge of the social norms and biases.
- Understanding the complexities of social standing, the built-in hurdles to mobility and acceptance by all those who happen not to be cis-white men [11], is important and essential, but ultimately not enough.
- Active allyship [12] demands action not only to support those affected, but to dismantle existing barriers and obstructions. Self-awareness, critical thinking and education are the tools that lead to action. Action is the real sign of allyship [13, 14].

QUESTIONS FOR ALLIES

It is important that allies to ask questions to enable an understanding of how women see their situation and why they engage in society in the way they do. Below are examples of questions allies could ask:

- Is it wrong for girls and women to be "bossy"?
- Why do girls and women want to be liked?
- Men, how do you perpetuate the bossy/liked expectations for women in your workplace?
- How do you see dominant gender expectations influencing how women and girls see themselves and what they can accomplish?
- How do these same gender expectations influence the negative experiences of girls and women in school, families and STEM workplaces?
- How is the pay gap influenced by these gender expectations?
- How do you perpetuate dominant gender expectations in your workplace?
- What is one action you can take starting today that would change that?
- What is another action you can take soon that would change that?

ALLYSHIP RESOURCES

Much more information and further resources, including reports, toolkits, and reflections on allyship, are available from a variety of sources listed in the references [15–34].

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Laura McCullough from University of Wisconsin-Stout and Mary Banwart, Tamara Falicov, Jenny Mehmedovic, and Jennifer Ng from the University of Kansas for their help and support. Special thanks go to Pere DeRoy and Timmia Hearn DeRoy for always being there and helping me become a better person.

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