

**Engaging Men as Social Justice Allies in Ending Violence**  
**Against Women:**  
**Evidence for a Social Norms Approach**

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Engaging Men as Social Justice Allies in Ending Violence Against Women:  
Evidence for a Social Norms Approach

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## ABSTRACT

The field of sexual assault prevention is shifting attention to address the role of men in ending violence against women. This shift includes educational interventions that address men's socialization, capacity for victim empathy, understanding of consent, and belief in rape myths. Recent studies have documented the importance of the often-misperceived norms men hold about other men's endorsement of rape-supportive attitudes and behaviors. This article provides further evidence supporting the design of population-based social norms interventions to prevent sexual assault. Data from this study suggest that men underestimate the importance that most men and women place on consent in sexual activity and the willingness of most men to intervene against sexual violence. In addition, men's personal adherence to only consensual activity and their willingness to act as women's allies in the face of sexual violence are strongly influenced by their perceptions of other men's and women's norms. Thus, these findings support the proposition that accurate normative data, which counters the misperception of rape-supportive environments, can be a critical part of a comprehensive campus effort to catalyze and support men's development as women's social justice allies in preventing sexual violence against women.

Key words: men, sexual violence prevention, social norms approach, social justice allies

## INTRODUCTION

A growing body of literature<sup>1,2</sup> documents the need for effective educational and policy interventions to prevent sexual assault of women. *Healthy Campus 2010*,<sup>3</sup> a framework for higher education to implement the health goals of the nation, devotes six objectives to sexual violence that highlight the importance of effective strategies to prevent sexual victimization on college campuses. Further, researchers and activists both inside and outside the health community are beginning to conceptualize violence against women as a social justice issue insofar as sexism perpetuates the inequalities that allow violence against women to take place.<sup>4</sup> While this article focuses in particular on what men can do to prevent violence against women, an extensive literature has called attention to the fact that some men may be victims of sexual assault as well.<sup>5</sup>

The field of sexual assault prevention is shifting attention to include practices that address the role of men based on research demonstrating the significant influence men have on each other's behavior.<sup>1,6-7</sup> For example, Berkowitz<sup>6</sup> suggested that rape prevention programs focusing on all-male peer groups could assist men to understand the commonalities of the male socialization experience and encourage them to challenge other men who express support for "rape myths." The *Mentors in Violence Prevention Program* (developed by Katz<sup>8</sup>) encourages male students to redefine American constructions of manhood and use their status to expose and reframe the prevailing male norms that equate male strength with power over women. More recently, Hong<sup>9</sup> developed *Men Against Violence*, a peer education and advocacy program that encourages and supports male college students to challenge cultural myths and stereotypes linking masculinity with violence. Finally, the curricular and theatrical

approaches developed by Kilmartin<sup>10</sup> educate college men about the social and gender context of sexual assault. These prevention programs, and others examined in recent reviews,<sup>1,11-14</sup> document a growing trend towards sexual assault prevention strategies directed specifically at men. Taken as a whole, these programs redefine sexual assault as not just a “women’s issue” but as a concern shared by men and women alike. These programs teach men to begin the process of being women’s “social justice allies” in ending violence against women.

An ally can be defined as a person who is a “member of the ‘dominant’ group or ‘majority’ group who works to end oppression in his or her personal and professional life through support of, and as an advocate with and for, the oppressed population.”<sup>15</sup> This definition suggests that it is possible to view men as potential allies in ending violence against women by changing their personal behavior and/or intervening to confront the problematic behavior of other men.

To date, interventions targeting men have consisted largely of educational workshops aimed at increasing men’s capacity to develop skills and engage in behaviors that are likely to reduce the incidence of sexual assault.<sup>1</sup> These interventions may challenge male socialization practices, teach men to have empathy for victims, emphasize consent in intimate relationships, and help men to be better allies to women. Although some of these interventions have resulted in increased empathy for victims, greater understanding of consent, and decreased belief in rape myths,<sup>2,16</sup> the impact of this type of workshop intervention format is limited by definition to those men who participate.

Environmental interventions that address the broader context in which sexual violence against women occurs are part of a newly emerging trend in the sexual assault

prevention field. Environmental approaches to prevention, especially those that seek to reach large populations through media strategies, face unique challenges. The goal of such approaches is to increase desirable positive health outcomes without also fostering unintended harmful outcomes, as can happen when the public's awareness of "risk factors" is amplified to the extreme point that exaggerations of risk actually occur.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, media-based efforts to change the "culture of rape" and influence "rape prone" men can sound overwhelming and pessimistic. To the extent that the hegemony of patriarchy and rigid hypermasculine gender roles *are* deeply ingrained in individuals, families, social customs, laws, institutions—indeed, in virtually every facet of living—then the work of changing that culture and the individuals living by its rules is enormous. The sexual assault prevention field often considers this problematic "rape culture" as the foundation that supports the continuum of sexual violence, but the tools for deconstructing this foundation remain elusive and highly theoretical despite the limited success of individual programs and workshops.

Help in solving this dilemma can be found in the college health literature that documents successful environmental interventions for other social health problems, which, like the "college drinking scene," were also once viewed as entrenched and intractable. An environmental strategy that has demonstrated impressive results in changing drinking behavior in widespread college populations is the social norms approach.<sup>18</sup> This approach to prevention is based upon data that demonstrate a disparity between the actual and perceived attitudinal or behavioral norms among college students and their peers.<sup>19,20</sup> Patterns of misperceptions exist with both overestimating risk and underestimating protection from such risks. Through social marketing media, small

group interventions, curriculum infusion, and other intervention strategies, misperceptions of peer norms can be rectified with accurate norms, thereby discouraging high risk drinking and encouraging greater protective behaviors.<sup>18</sup>

In the sexual assault prevention field, only a few researchers have taken this approach of focusing on how the majority culture, or normative environment, may support individuals' actual beliefs and behaviors to act as agents empowered to prevent sexual violence. Consequently, the potential for applying the social norms framework toward the broader cultural issues associated with sexual assault prevention is great.<sup>1</sup> While we know much about "rape proclivity," we have scant information about the characteristics of men who are *unlikely* to rape and who are uncomfortable with the entire continuum of behaviors representing stereotypical American masculinity. Most researchers have failed to examine both the healthy, nonviolent behaviors and attitudes of men, and the potential inaccuracies of perceived male norms. Moreover, many men may misperceive both the norms of male peers and the norms of female peers in ways that could encourage problem behavior and limit men's capacity to reduce sexual assault and to intervene against other men's harmful attitudes and coercive behaviors.

An extensive sociological literature describes the difficulty men have in living up to gender role expectations and the internal conflicts these expectations create.<sup>21-22</sup> Men also report that they do not personally believe in many societal myths about masculinity but believe that other men do.<sup>23</sup> Externally, men underestimate the extent to which other men are uncomfortable with sexist behavior towards women.<sup>24-25</sup> Berkowitz<sup>1</sup> has argued that this misperception is likely to keep men from intervening against the inappropriate behavior of other men. The opportunity to reduce these difficulties and discomforts

provides the motivation for men to work to change the same cultural myths and stereotypes that have also resulted in violence against women. If men's discomfort with how they are taught to act as men could be revealed as normative, men might be more willing to be themselves and express discomfort with the behavior of other men.

Recent pilot research suggests that social norms interventions designed to counter the misperceived rape-supportive normative environment may be effective in sexual assault prevention. For example, Kilmartin et al.<sup>24</sup> developed a campaign that successfully reduced men's misperceptions about most other men's comfort level with sexist comments. Bruce<sup>25</sup> implemented a social norms media campaign based on Kilmartin's work and publicized messages correcting men's misperceptions about the rape-supportive attitudes and behavior of their peers. By exposing these misperceptions, Bruce demonstrated success in increasing the percentage of men who engaged in behaviors likely to reduce the incidence of sexual assault. Finally, White, Williams, and Cho<sup>26</sup> documented misperceptions in people's beliefs about the importance of consent in intimate relationships. They developed a social norms marketing campaign to correct these misperceptions that was followed by a reduction in the incidence of sexual assault and increased reporting of assaults by victims. These studies represent a different approach to preventing sexual assault by focusing on the positive cultural characteristics of men and by reinforcing the attitudes and behaviors in men that increase their capacity to be active agents of change.

Thus, this study addresses men's misperceptions of both men's and women's norms and suggests that correcting these misperceptions may be one strategy that has the potential to expand men's capacities to be women's allies in dismantling violence. We



examine actual and perceived norms concerning the acceptability of sexual violence in a randomly selected population of college students at a midsize four-year state university. In particular, we explore two related issues: (a) the importance one places on consent in sexual intimacy and (b) willingness to intervene on behaviors that could lead to sexual assault. We examine the extent to which college men misperceive the norms of their own sex and the opposite sex. We then focus on the critical question for sexual assault prevention planners: How are men's attitudes and behaviors potentially influenced by their perceptions which may vary in accuracy? The answer to this question can be used to design effective social norms prevention strategies and thereby increase a culture of safety and reduce sexual assault on college campuses.

## METHODS

### Participants and Sampling Procedure

In spring 2002, we randomly selected 2,500 undergraduate students for participation from the university registrar's database of 11,189 students attending Western Washington University (WWU) in Bellingham, Washington. Each student received a mailed packet of research materials approved by our institutional review board for the protection of human subjects. The packet contained a cover letter, the National College Health Assessment (NCHA) Survey, the Violence Related Behaviors and Beliefs (VRBB) Insert, a business reply envelope in which to return the surveys, and, in order to increase participation, a business reply postcard to enter a \$1,000 drawing. We informed students that they implied their consent to participate by returning the survey. We also asked students to mail the postcards containing their names separately from the survey and insert to ensure confidentiality. One month after the initial mailing, we sent a

reminder postcard to the students who had not yet returned their surveys. Due to limited funding, we were not able to send a complete second mailing of the survey.

A total of 618 students responded. Thirty-five could not be contacted, resulting in a return rate 25.1 percent. Table 1 compares the demographics of the responding sample with the WWU population. Although the return rate was low with a single mailing of the survey, the sample closely reflected the population in terms of class year distribution and ethnicity and was consistent with previous response rates to mailed surveys at WWU.

Because there was a significant difference in the response rates of men and women, with more women responding than men, all statistical estimates presented in this study control for respondent sex. Therefore, no bias was introduced due to the greater representation of women.

#### Measures

For the purpose of this study, the NCHA<sup>27</sup> survey component provided the demographic information we needed for sample assessment and for control of the analyses. We developed the VRBB Insert to be used in conjunction with the spring 2002 implementation of the NCHA survey, using modified items from the Discomfort with Sexism Scale,<sup>24</sup> the College Date Rape Attitudes and Behavior Survey,<sup>28</sup> and additional items we developed ourselves.

We designed the VRBB Insert to assess students' attitudes and behaviors regarding violence and sexual assault, as well as to measure their perceptions of the typical WWU student on the same topics. For this research, we focused on questions from two categories: (a) the importance of consent before sexual intimacy and (b) willingness to intervene in situations that could lead to sexual assault. Table 2 provides

the wording for each of the six questions on importance of consent and willingness to intervene that we used in this study.

Our goal in designing questions in these two categories was to compare students' actual norms versus perceived normative beliefs and behaviors regarding the importance of consent before sexual intimacy and their willingness to intervene against behaviors that could lead to sexual assault. Such question pairing is the essential cornerstone of social norms research. We developed three-part questions for each of the six items, which we used to compare differences between male and female students' actual beliefs and behaviors and their perceptions of peer norms. We instructed participants to give three responses for each item from the following three perspectives: (1) you personally, (2) the average male WWU student, and (3) the average female WWU student. For each of the resulting 18 items, we provided five response options on a Likert-like scale ("Never," "Rarely," "Sometimes," "Most of the Time," "Always"), scored from 0 to 4 respectively, corresponding to importance of consent in sexual activity and higher levels of willingness to intervene in sexual assault.

## RESULTS

The first step in our investigation was to conduct three factor analyses of the six items: one for personal responses, one for perceptions of WWU females, and one for perceptions of WWU males. Factor analysis was used as a method to transform multiple items into a minimum number of distinguishable variables. In each instance, the results produced two factors with eigenvalues above 1.00. (Eigenvalues above 1.00 suggest that distinct variables have been identified.) These factors corresponded precisely to the

importance of consent questions (items 1-3 in Table 2) and the willingness to intervene questions (items 4-6 in Table 2).

We used the varimax rotation method in the factor analysis to produce the factor loadings for the optimally differentiated factors. For the first factor, the consent questions had very high loadings (between .60 and .79) and the willingness to intervene questions had very weak loadings (between -.08 and .14). In contrast, for the second factor, the intervention questions had very strong factor loadings (between .57 and .88) while the importance of consent items had weak factor loadings (between -.07 and .23). Thus, these factor loadings clearly suggest that “importance of consent” and “willingness to intervene” are distinct factors measuring different constructs.

For subsequent analyses, the three items for men’s and women’s personal responses to the importance of consent were added together to create a single index, as were the personal responses for the items on willingness to intervene. Likewise, we created indices for perceptions of WWU males’ and WWU females’ importance of consent and willingness to intervene by adding together the respondents’ scores for the three corresponding items. Thus, we produced three indices for both factors, representing the actual norms for men and women, the perceived male norms, and the perceived female norms.

#### Actual and Perceived Norms

Using the mean scores for personal and perceived “importance of consent” and “willingness to intervene,” we examined (a) actual norms for men and women, based on the mean personal responses, and (b) men’s perceptions of these norms, based on the mean for men’s perceptions of the norm for women and other men (see Table 3). First,

we see that there was no significant difference between men and women regarding the actual norm for the importance placed on consent. Both groups, on average, indicated very strong commitment to obtaining and honoring consent in sexual relationships with mean scores above 11 for males and females (on a potential scoring range of 0 to 12, with an observed range of 0 to 12 for males and 6 to 12 for females). Yet men's perceptions of what is normative for male peers and what is normative for female peers regarding consent were significantly different than these actual norms. That is, these college men notably underestimated the importance of consent typically espoused by male and female peers. In addition, men's misperceptions of male norms were greater than men's misperceptions of female norms.

Concerning willingness to intervene, we found considerably more ambivalence with mean scores for personal responses falling approximately in the center of the potential scoring range (0 to 12), with observed ranges of 0 to 12 for both males and females. There was no significant difference between males' and females' actual norms for this measure. Again, men's perceptions, on average, significantly underestimated what was most typical of their male peers on this variable. However, males significantly overestimated females' willingness to intervene. Thus, the data indicate that for both importance of consent and willingness to intervene, men underestimated the healthy, supportive norms of other men.

#### Perceived Norms Predicting Personal Attitudes and Behavior

The indices for the importance men personally placed on consent and for their willingness to intervene were each entered into multiple regression analyses with the four variables concerning perceived norms as predictors: perceived importance of consent for

males, perceived importance of consent for females, perceived male willingness to intervene, and perceived female willingness to intervene. The standardized regression coefficients are reported in Table 4.

#### Importance of Consent

When men perceived consent before sexual activity to be a strong norm for both females and males, they were more likely to personally report that consent was imperative. (Perceptions about norms for willingness to intervene did not make any significant additional contribution to personal importance of consent.) Twenty-eight percent of the variance in men's reported importance of consent was explained by the extent that men perceived consent to be important to both men and women.

#### Personal Willingness to Intervene

The only significant predictor of males' actual willingness to intervene in a situation that may lead to sexual assault was their perception of other males' willingness to intervene. Men were much more likely to intervene in a situation that leads to sexual assault when they perceived other males also to be likely to intervene in such a situation ( $\beta = .64$ ). Forty-two percent of the variance in males' willingness to intervene was accounted for in this regression. Men's perception of women's willingness to intervene was not a significant predictor, nor were perceptions of the importance of consent in this regression. Thus, the sole predictor of men's willingness to intervene is the extent to which men perceive other men as willing to intervene to prevent sexual assault.

### SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The data from this study support the argument that a social norms approach to sexual assault prevention for men could serve to empower men to be stronger social

justice allies of women by fostering interventions against the problematic behaviors of other men. Findings of this study replicate those of previous research suggesting that men misperceive the norms of peers regarding sexual behavior as being less concerned about consent and less protective of others than is really the case. These data further suggest that men's perceptions of norms, be they accurate or not, exert a strong influence on men's own consideration of consent and willingness to intervene.

The strongest predictor of males' personal importance of consent was their perception of the women's norm for consent. This makes sense insofar as heterosexual men would be concerned with the perceptions of the women with whom they want to be intimate. Nevertheless, men's perceptions of the male norm were also a significant influence, and in both instances, they underestimated the support of peers for obtaining consent. This suggests that interventions to correct men's misperceptions of male norms about the importance of consent, as well as perceptions of female norms about consent, could have positive influence on the personal importance men themselves place on consent. In particular, correcting men's misperceptions of other men's attitudes toward consent could have special importance when considering the data presented in Table 3, which show men underestimating the male norm for consent more than they underestimate the female norm.

Our findings strongly indicate that any attempt to change the larger culture of violence against women should also include a focus on men's willingness to intervene in situations that could potentially lead to sexual violence. Indeed, men's own willingness to intervene was significantly and strongly associated with *only* their perceptions of how other men might act in similar situations. Thus, correcting men's widespread

underestimations of male peers' willingness to intervene could make a particularly important contribution to the reduction of sexual violence.

Although this study strongly suggests that men who think other men will intervene in situations that could lead to sexual assault will also intervene, it does not assert that this approach would work with *all* men. Men with a history of sexual assaults have not benefited from other education-oriented sexual assault prevention efforts,<sup>29</sup> and may need more intensive treatment within judicial and/or clinical systems. Whether this minority of men would be influenced by other men who *are* active, visible, and vocal allies against sexual violence, however, is an area worthy of future research.

The need for colleges and universities to focus on enhancing safety and well being for students is compelling. Results from this study suggest that practitioners could improve efforts to prevent sexual assault in college populations using a social norms approach. These findings suggest five key considerations for strengthening the campus cultural environments to reduce sexual violence:

1. ***Strengthen the dominant culture of safety and respect.*** If it is true that most men are willing to be part of the solution to ending violence against women on college campuses, how might our thinking about sexual assault prevention programs change? This new research asks us to re-evaluate whether we may be neglecting a part of the solution by overlooking the positive and healthy attitudes and behaviors of some men, perhaps the majority, who may want to act differently towards other men and women, and thus contribute to ending violence against women.



2. ***Engage men as allies*** in prevention efforts by aligning them with the majority who already support the aims of a safe campus initiative. Instead of driving a wedge between men and women by defining male culture as being synonymous with rape culture, efforts should be made to support the positive qualities of the majority of men while also focusing on the problems that sexual violence causes women. Men may in fact be willing to change their personal behaviors and their actions towards other men and use their power and status on behalf of reducing violence towards women.
3. ***Reduce the effect of norms misperception (the “boomerang effect”)*** that is caused by an exclusive focus on the extreme behaviors of the minority of men. Perpetrators need to be held accountable for their behavior. Yet, an important resource is overlooked when the factors inhibiting men’s willingness to intervene against these men are overlooked. Thus, the focus on the problem should not allow us to ignore the healthy norms in our communities that can be incorporated into the solution. Asking different research questions, which focus on cultures of protection and intervening to confront harmful attitudes, could help reframe the social context of the rape problem and make room for new tools and solutions that can be incorporated into individual, group, and environmental interventions.
4. ***Strengthen accurate campus norms through multiple communication strategies.*** This study and others clearly establish the influence of accurate normative data on factors influencing sexual assault. Thus traditional educational programs may need to be revised to include normative

information. More importantly, social marketing and strategic communications strategies have the potential to reach thousands of students with repeated doses of accurate normative information. By reinforcing the existing positive attitudes and behaviors of most students, these social norms messages can be a part of larger campus efforts to reduce sexual assault and to encourage students with problematic attitudes and behaviors to change.

5. *Amplify the voice of the silent majority* of students already aligned with the aims of campus sexual assault prevention programs by engaging bystanders to speak and act in ways that promote healthy non-violent attitudes and behaviors. By shifting the public debate to include our identity as a “culture of protection,” we might enlist the support of the majority, whose positive attitudes and values might otherwise remain silent. The amplification of the positive culture which serves to eliminate sexual violence does not deny or minimize the seriousness of the issue of rape, but in fact empowers the very opposite. It stands to strengthen the culture and individuals to act in ways which are consistent with the values and predominant behaviors of the majority of men.

## CONCLUSION

Although there is a growing literature on the development of ally behavior,<sup>30-31</sup> the specific question of how college men develop into women’s social justice allies in ending violence has rarely been asked. This research suggests that an important first step may be to increase men’s accurate perceptions of women’s and more so other men’s attitudes and behaviors toward sexual violence against women, using the social norms approach.

Then, in conjunction with other individual and environmental interventions, men may be empowered to act in congruence with their values.

While we must always address the harmful attitudes and coercive behaviors that lend support to sexual violence,<sup>32-34</sup> this study suggests that advocates can also strengthen the already existent (majority) culture—which is more accurately defined as being healthy and supportive of reducing acts of violence. This paradigm shift could be the difference between seeing the work of rape prevention as an overwhelming uphill struggle and seeing it as an energized social movement.

A focus on men's personal willingness to act in the face of sexual violence, when reinforced by their more accurate perceptions of other men's and women's beliefs and behaviors, is clearly underrepresented in the research literature. This study proposes that campus social norms interventions to prevent sexual violence can be an important component of strengthening men's willingness to intervene against the harmful behavior of other men. In view of the fact that this research represents findings from only one study on one campus, we have to be cautious about overgeneralizing these results. Research employing larger samples from diverse campus populations, with higher return rates, is needed in order to increase our confidence in the utility and reliability of these results. We also need research that uses broader measures of violence beyond the basic items of "importance of consent" and "willingness to intervene" utilized in this study. Nevertheless, our findings *do* support the hypothesis that accurate normative data, which counters the misperception of rape-supportive environments, can be a critical part of comprehensive sexual assault prevention efforts—including legal, judicial, consciousness-raising, skills building, and more advanced stages of ally building

components—that together catalyze and support men’s development as women’s social justice allies in preventing sexual violence.

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TABLE 1

Student Demographic Characteristics for Sample and WWU Population, Spring 2002

<u>Student Characteristic</u>	<u>Sample (N=618)</u>	<u>WWU Population (N=11,189)</u>
<u>Sex</u>		
Males	28.5%	44.1%
Females	71.5%	55.9%
<u>Year in school</u>		
Freshman	16.5%	19.6%
Sophomore	18.0%	20.6%
Junior	32.7%	26.9%
Senior	32.8%	33.0%
<u>Ethnicity</u>		
White/Caucasian	81.1%	78.4%
Black/African American	1.6%	1.8%
Hispanic/Latino	2.8%	2.9%
Asian/Pacific Islander	6.3%	7.3%
Native American	2.4%	1.9%
Other/Multicultural	5.8%	7.8%

TABLE 2

Six Questions on Importance of Consent and Willingness to Intervene

1. I would stop sexual activity when asked to even if I were already aroused.
2. It is important to get consent before sexual intimacy.
3. I believe one should stop the first time a date says no to sexual activity.
4. When I hear sexist comments, I indicate my disapproval.
5. When I witness a male “hitting on” a woman and I know she doesn’t want it, I intervene.
6. When I witness a situation in which it looks like a female will end up being taken advantage of, I intervene.

TABLE 3

Actual Gender Norms and Men's Perceived Gender Norms (Mean Scores) for  
Importance of Consent in Sexual Activity and Willingness to Intervene Against  
Sexual Violence

<u>Index</u>		<u>Actual</u>	<u>Males' Perception of</u>
Importance of Consent <sup>a</sup>	Male Norm	11.36	8.44**
	Female Norm	11.58	9.97**
Willingness to Intervene <sup>a</sup>	Male Norm	5.76	4.71**
	Female Norm	6.07	6.66*

Note: Differences between male and female actual norms are not significant ( $p > .05$ ).

\*Significant difference between actual and perceived norm at  $p < .01$ ; \*\* $p < .001$ .

<sup>a</sup>Scores ranged from 0 to 12.

TABLE 4

Standardized Regression Coefficients for Perceived Norms Predicting Men's Personal  
Importance of Consent in Sexual Activity and Willingness to Intervene Against  
Sexual Violence

<u>Independent Variables (Perceived Norms)</u>	<u>Personal Importance of Consent (Males)</u>	<u>Personal Willingness to Intervene (Males)</u>
Male Importance of Consent	.20 <sup>*</sup>	-.07
Female Importance of Consent	.39 <sup>**</sup>	.06
Male Willingness to Intervene	-.06	.64 <sup>**</sup>
Female Willingness to Intervene	-.01	.02
R-Squared	.28	.42

\*Coefficient is significant at  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .001$ .