

What's the Best Way for Men to Be Profeminist?

(For Starters, Be Vulnerable and Humble)

By Alan Berkowitz

Ultimately it is our own vulnerability upon which we depend.

—Rainer Maria Rilke

Since October 2017 when the #MeToo moment became the #MeToo movement, many men have been challenged to take a hard look at their behavior; to question not only their own actions but also those of other men. Longtime social justice educator, researcher and trainer Alan Berkowitz has been deeply considering the question of men “walking their talk” particularly as it relates to profeminist men. “Is our knowledge about gender, sexism and male privilege leading us to humility?” he asked. “Recent events suggest not in all cases.”

As awareness and attention grows regarding sexual harassment and assault, “there are profeminist men who may position themselves as ardent supporters of women’s empowerment but who have not walked their talk,” Berkowitz notes. “Their support for gender equality in public may not match their behavior in private.” In this groundbreaking article, Berkowitz investigates how we explain this contradiction and offers recommendations for what we should do about it.



Men's reluctance to hold each other accountable means women generally have to carry the burden of calling men out.

I start with the belief that most men have been raised to be men in unhealthy ways. Consequently, we need healing and transformation. And although we may have rejected our “male socialization” in our heads, some of us may not have done so in our hearts. While intellectual understanding of conventional manhood—which has led many men to support women’s empowerment—is necessary and important, it is not sufficient to ensure that men are whole. We need only look at all the so-called enlightened men who have had charges of harassment and assault leveled against them, including leading profeminist activists and scholars. This contradiction suggests not just an apparent disconnect between our knowledge and understanding, but also a lack of openness to unflinchingly engage in rigorous self-examination. To me, the latter course is the only path to fostering the wisdom and humility that can lead to inspired, enlightened action.

My experience has shown me that the willingness to be vulnerable—as difficult and painful as that may be—is critical for men’s healing. But that is just the beginning. Being vulnerable helps

to ground us, awakens our intellectual understanding, and invites us to also awaken our heart’s understanding—in other words, to go deeper. Vulnerability, the willingness to feel exposed and unprotected, not only contradicts the messages men have received—be strong, tough, competent, unemotional and expert—but it also opens the door to inner transformation and growth. And through that door is the path to “be the change that we wish to see in the world.”

Being intellectually brilliant and labeling ourselves profeminist is no guarantee that we will do the inner work necessary for healing. In fact, when intellectual prowess is combined with the unequal recognition and praise that profeminist men receive (compared with women working for gender equality), it can promote narcissism and ego, obscuring even the need for healing. Too many men are unaware of that need, and that’s dangerous. It has led to men taking more credit than we deserve, to not sufficiently honoring women advocates, and to stroking our egos with the acclaim and appreciation we get simply for doing what’s right: opposing sexism.

Operating with an inflated sense of self creates the conditions for an additional danger: expressing our natural vulnerability, loneliness and emotional neediness in unhealthy ways by enacting sexism and patriarchy through abuse. There it is: a vicious cycle in which negative male socialization is reinforced, rather than being undermined and transformed. We can continue to present ourselves as advocates and allies of feminism, but who suffers? In many cases the very women we claim to be allies to, and ultimately us as well.

A 2018 article in the *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment and Trauma* titled “Walking the Walk or Just Talk? A Global Examination of Men’s Intentions to Take Violence Preventative Action” illustrates this gap between intention and action. Five researchers surveyed anti-violence activists in English, French and Spanish from more than 400 organizations on five continents about their antiviolence attitudes and behaviors. Two hundred men who work as employees or volunteers responded, approximately half from North America and the rest distributed across Africa, Asia, Europe,

Latin America and the Caribbean. As one would expect, the men reported a high level of willingness to engage in a variety of bystander actions, recognized male privilege, and strongly endorsed profeminist attitudes. Of particular interest was the dramatic gap between questions about anti-violence activism and seeking help; the men scored lowest on the question of did they “seek help or guidance because of my own behavior towards women.” Perhaps the men did not imagine they needed guidance because of their “own behavior”—but this is precisely the point. As men who practice unconscious sexism, privilege and a patriarchal mindset—and we all do to some extent—we can be unaware of our behavior because it is unconscious.

What then can we do? The opposite of what these men were doing: seeking guidance “because of our own behavior towards women.” *This* is what is missing from our activism: allowing ourselves to be vulnerable by seeking feedback, inviting criticism, and soliciting advice from female advocates and colleagues, even—and especially—*when we think we don't need it*. In fact, thinking that we don't need it is one of the greatest dangers of all because it is



Thinking that men don't need to hear criticism from female advocates is a great danger because it is likely a sign of egoism, self-protection and unconscious male posturing.

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Others have pointed out that profeminist men who seek to be allies of women may end up reproducing sexism and patriarchy in the very act of offering assistance. They point out that *how* we help is just as important as *if* we help. In an illuminating study of male ally behavior titled “Comrades in the Struggle? Feminist Women Prefer Male Allies Who Offer Autonomy, Not Dependency-Oriented Help,” Shaun Wiley and Christine Dunne point out that men who offer help in the form of answers and solutions reproduce the patriarchal structure in which women must depend on men for assistance. In their study they found that feminist women reject this form of help and prefer what

they call “autonomy-oriented help” in which men “take the back seat”—offering partial support without seeking to solve problems themselves. They noted that “autonomy-oriented support challenges the gender hierarchy by affirming women’s competence whereas dependency-oriented support reinforces the hierarchy by implying that women are not capable of helping themselves.”

Are We Willing to Be Vulnerable?

Clearly, men need to make deeper changes, including cultivating an openness to the type of critical, constructive feedback women can offer that will help us to see ourselves with honesty and offer us the motivation to change.

Are we willing to be vulnerable and acknowledge our imperfections and faults and learn to be humble? Can we seek out experiences to contradict male socialization patterns that demand we be strong, in charge, and invulnerable? In my experience I have found such a change can occur in a number of ways, including:

- Joining a process-oriented men's group that fosters honest, open communication and self-disclosure
- Being willing to be vulnerable, unguarded, and open in our personal relationships
- Engaging in healthy spiritual pursuits or a relationship with a spiritual teacher who teaches and practices humility and from whom we can learn techniques for the diluting of our egoism
- Being accountable to women, including seeking their honest feedback, advice, and impressions of us, our work, and our behavior

All of these recommendations are complemented by our aspiring to embody the characteristics of an engaged ally, including:

- Seeking out and learning from uncomfortable situations
- Finding appropriate opportunities to listen to individuals from other groups about their experiences
- Being accountable to the groups we wish to be allies to
- Doing our own personal healing work

If men can achieve these aims, it will help us to begin closing the gap between our words and our actions. In my own efforts to do this I have found it beneficial to share with women with whom I am working—at the beginning of and during our personal or professional relationship—the following:

- I know I am not perfect
- I commit to being open to your feedback and to hearing your concerns and comments about my language and behavior when you are willing to share them
- I will try to be responsible for monitoring myself and to seek feedback from others

In a similar vein, during my early work developing all-male campus rape prevention programs in the 1980s, my colleagues and I found it beneficial to present our workshop to women in the community, not only for them to observe and be aware of the work we were doing with men (which they could not otherwise attend), but also to solicit their comments and feedback. This practice invariably resulted in our receiving excellent advice that improved our presentations, as well as strengthening trust and communication with our colleagues.

—Alan Berkowitz

We may not be aware of the effects of this gap between attitude and action—both in ourselves and in others—and especially on the women whom we profess to work alongside of as equals. We also may not be aware that “There is a *ton* of anger out there concerning this issue” and that this anger is directed at many of us. Such backlash was expressed in a collection of public Facebook comments by female domestic violence and sexual assault prevention activists posted at the end of 2018. Here’s a sampling:

- “Some male leaders in the movement are so puffed up with ego that they have no room for vulnerability.”
- “I am tired of these men promoting the end of violence against women for their own gain.”
- “Some men are commodifying and colonizing the battered women’s movement.”
- “[M]en making huge amounts of money and garnering power from funders is a real problem.”
- “This marginalization of and ignoring of the wishes and needs of victims and the ‘be all, know all,’ ‘my way is best way’ attitude of some men in this movement has undermined the inclusive, feminist processes we always worked so hard to develop and maintain.”

How can men be more fully engaged with the changes we seek inside and outside of ourselves, and be more conscious about acting out the negative aspects of male socialization? In addition to being accountable by seeking honest feedback and criticism from women allies, *we also need meaningful, honest and open dialogue with other men about who we are and what we need to become.* We need to have a place where we can show up just as we are—with all of our faults and foibles—and not as we wish to be seen by the world. And we need to favor collaboration over competition and to alter our role from expert to learner.

In their 2015 book *Some Men: Feminist Allies and the Movement to End Violence Against Women*, Michael Messner, Max Green-



What’s missing from men’s activism is allowing ourselves to be vulnerable: seeking feedback, criticism and advice from female colleagues, even—especially—when we think we don’t need it.

berg, and Tal Peretz conclude that when working together with feminist women, men should take care to listen and learn. They should make sure their voices do not drown out the voices of women in the movement. And, they should ensure that their goals and priorities do not divert resources away from feminist women. In short, profeminist men should thoughtfully consider how they are accountable to women. Male privilege and power do not disappear when men call themselves feminists or commit themselves to fighting gendered oppression. Doing the hard work of embodying feminism means men should model in their interactions with women the egalitarian society they hope to build.

And still, we face another danger. The guilt and shame men feel when we become aware of male privilege—along with the awareness of our transgressions and culpability in enacting sexism (to whatever degree)—can foster a need for approval from feminist women. In some cases we may seek this approval by our actions, or intellectual brilliance, or our support of their work. Paradoxically, in an example of *female* socialization, some women may enthusiastically express their approval, delighted to see that there are men joining the movement for gender equality, but in so doing they may feed into their own socialization as nurturers, illustrated in the following quote: “The adulation that [profeminist men] receive from some women in the movement—in particular those who are more new or who do not have a background in feminist theory—just further feeds [the men’s] ego and narcissism, embedding their bloated sense of self-importance.” Such adulation reproduces the paradigm of women nurturing men, shifting to women the burden of the work we should be doing ourselves.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we must also hold ourselves accountable to intervene with other men when their behavior is unacceptable. In a 2015 study, “Male Privilege and Accountability in Domestic and Sexual Violence Work,” feminist sociologist Kris Macomber noted that one of the biggest problems of men promoting gender equality is their “reluctance to hold each other accountable,” resulting in “women generally carry[ing] the burden of ‘calling men out.’” If we are uncomfortable with other

A Man Is a Good Ally When...

- He understands that women’s need to be empowered is not a threat to his strength as a man, but rather an additional strength.
- He is a nonjudgmental partner, which implies he believes in equality and respect.
- He listens to women and has a willingness to “call out” other men on their issues.
- He is able to take the direction and leadership in violence prevention work from women.
- He does not try to confine the women he is supporting or define the problems that they share with him.

- He models behavior for his friends and other men by letting others see his example.
- He is not struggling with his own manhood and does not need to prove that he’s a man.
- He has done his personal work to become aware of his own issues relating to the issue of domestic and sexual violence.
- He is willing to hear women’s reality “full out” because he realizes that there are aspects of this reality that he will not know about.
- He listens, but he doesn’t try to “fix” the problem by himself.

Excerpted from the Spring 2002 newsletter of the Black Church and Domestic Violence Institute (www.bcdvi.org).

Seven Principles Men Can Follow to Advance Gender Equality

In a new book on men's and women's groups, profeminist activist-writer Tom Weiner describes seven principles that guided him in his writing:

- Men need to have access to a wide range of emotions and expressive skills in order to be able to articulate themselves respectfully and compassionately.
- It is incumbent upon men to treat all women as equals.
- Men need to nurture their mental, emotional, physical and psychological needs through healthy relationships with other men, women and children.
- In order to ensure that healthy masculinity includes the nurturance of children, men need to take an active role in raising (or mentoring/coaching) children.
- It is essential that men be allies in the various struggles waged by women, LGBTQ+ people, people of color and other groups fighting for their rights.
- Men need to recognize their privilege in society and actively work to support women seeking equality—from reproductive rights to equal pay for equal work; from affordable childcare to family leave policies, since these rights will accrue to the benefit of our society.
- Men need to speak out and actively organize against men's violence and abuse of women and children.

—Tom Weiner

From the preface to *Intimate Stories: Reflections from Four Men's and Women's Support Groups* by Tom Weiner © 2019. tweiner909@comcast.net

men's words or behavior and do nothing—or passively wait for women to address the problem—we have failed to live up to our responsibility.

Our failure can be seen in published responses to accusations against prominent male colleagues, with some men active in the profeminist men's movement remarking that they “were not surprised.” Such an admission implicates us as bystanders who have chosen to overlook rather than to intervene. If we did or said nothing after witnessing grandstanding, microaggressions, self-promotion, and privilege and/or power-abusing behaviors—then it's on us to admit our deficiencies and to acknowledge that we should have taken action. Our silence becomes a form of complicity. So it is us men who are accountable for not subverting the culture that allows these behaviors to flourish.

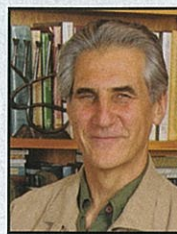
Once at lunch during a conference I attended that included a group of male antiviolenence activists, I suggested we share our greatest challenges doing this work. By far the majority of responses were about the difficulty and fear we felt to hold other men accountable, especially when they were colleagues, family, or old friends. Although the fear of a negative response and of harming a relationship was certainly warranted, by not intervening we not only became part of the problem, but we also carried the guilt of knowing that we didn't live up to our ideals. However, there may be a middle path between seeing our choices as either inaction or direct confrontation: intervening in an indirect, non-confrontational way that addresses the behavior but may preserve the relationship. While some situations may clearly require a more active, confrontational approach, intervening indirectly can also

be effective. (I wrote about these approaches in the Summer 2016 issue of *Voice Male*.)

The iconic 1960s activist slogan “You're either part of the solution or part of the problem” has been updated: “You can't be part of the solution until you understand *how* you are part of the problem.” Despite how far men have come on our journey of self-awareness about gender inequality, we're not there yet—as long as our actions have the unintended effect of reinforcing the problem we are trying to solve.

The #MeToo movement, through the many uncomfortable wounds it has uncovered, offers men an opportunity to look more deeply inside ourselves, to ask for more open and honest reflections personally and from others, to identify what we need to change, and to take the risk of holding ourselves and other men accountable. And we can do this with an empowered awareness and understanding rather than with crippling guilt. By being willing to see *how* we are part of the problem we will begin to become more effective as part of the solution. By practicing humility, we will be on the path that can lead us not just to healing but to wisdom.

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