

Men: Moving from Bystander to Allies

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Bystander theory and practice is perhaps the most widely used strategy for engaging people in general in efforts to prevent sexual and domestic violence. There are several versions available, including "Green Dot" which is the main version utilized by the Center for Women and Families.



The notion of bystander is that there are a host of reasons that people "stand by" when something occurs which is troubling. For our purposes, examining why people "stand by" when they see domestic or sexual violence -- or the dynamics, attitudes or behaviors that suggest abusive behaviors -- is a critical aspect of working to prevent sexual and domestic violence. Women and men often see things that suggest abuse, violence or at the very least disrespect (such as victim-blaming comments, rape jokes, comments about how men should "treat their wife", etc.), but don't do anything to intervene. There are reasons for this, but the point of bystander intervention efforts are to empower folks who "stand by" to do something proactive.

Research suggests a number of reasons including:

- Not defining it as a "problem"
- Don't know how to intervene
- Diffusion of Responsibility (the "someone else will take care of it" phenomenon)
- Social norm (our assumption that it is not normal for people(men) to intervene)
- Fear of the consequences of intervening
- Attribution of cause (how one understand who is responsible for the situation\

among others...

Doing something proactive in the face of an abuse dynamic can have at least two positive effects -- it interrupts the specific abuse that is occurring, and it helps shift the social norm that allows folks to "stand by."

Most bystander theory and practice fails to take gender into account. There are some key ways that gender impacts on these dynamics, and one main way that it adds another layer of challenges in our efforts to engage and empower men and boys. Gender impacts on many of the reasons folks stand by listed above because generally, we as men, see these issues differently than women do. Men do not, for the most part, define domestic or sexual violence, or "threatening situations" the same way women do. Because of the way that these issues have been framed, men tend to assume that this is a "women's issue" which positions us to "diffuse our responsibility" onto women. Many of the other reasons that people tend to "stand by" are magnified or complicated by gender.

As suggested above, men tend to define the "problem" of domestic and sexual violence differently than women do. Men tend to view the "problem" of gender based violence in exclusively physically violent terms so the manipulative, coercive, dominating, threatening dynamics that women generally include as a part of the violence is not so much identified by men. Furthermore, women generally recognize that the threat of gender based violence to be in many ways as damaging and as much of the problem as the actual assaults. In other words, the problem of rape is not just the men who rape, it's the threat of rape that permeates so much of women's experience. Men rarely define this aspect as a part of the problem.

Part of our manhood training has been, for most men, our responsibility to protect women. Almost universally, "protecting women" includes – and often means – protecting women physically...using physical violence or threats in order to keep women safe. This means that for most men, responding to domestic violence or sexual assault means kicking the ass of some man who hurt a woman we love. A significant side effect of this dynamic is that men are generally very limited in our toolbox of responses. In other words, we don't know so much how to do anything more than to stand by. Many men have the experience of knowing that some other man's behavior is not acceptable or respectful, but the behavior doesn't warrant an ass-kicking. And so – we don't know what to do or how to intervene.

At the same time, many men know enough about domestic and sexual violence, the dynamics and the impact, to know that our "intervention" may in fact make things worse. Many of us know that confronting him (in the case of domestic violence) too harshly may result in him taking it out on her. As a society and as communities, we have generally done a lousy job of supporting men to know how to intervene, much less prevent, in ways that might be effective to

Historically and currently, we have positioned gender based violence (rape, domestic violence, stalking, sexual harassment, sex trafficking, etc.) firmly as "women's issues." By doing so, we have just as firmly positioned men to **not** take responsibility. As a society, we have placed the responsibility for responding to and preventing all forms of gender based violence squarely and solely on the shoulders of women. As men who care, few of us have been taught how to respond in a way that supports women's leadership and autonomy.

Which leads to the social norm of men not doing anything (other than the occasional ass kicking) in response to or to prevent gender based violence. It's "normal" for men to stand by when sexism or gender based violence occurs. Even if we recognize that something is wrong, few men feel empowered enough to say something/do something. This social norm is powerful! Consider a men's locker room, for example – perhaps one of spaces in which the social norms are most powerful. It is not uncommon for the conversation, should it turn to women, sex and

men's relationships with women, to turn dis-respectful. It is equally common for there to be men in those locker rooms to be offended by some of this chatter. And yet, almost never do men challenge each other in the locker room when other men are making comments or statements that are rape-supporting or which blame victims for being abused. The norm in that space is for men to go along. This is not to suggest that men who are offended and remain quiet are cowards. Rather it's to point out the strength of the social norms that exist which support men's silence and inactivity – men's bystanding. There is a parallel norm for women's bystanding, but if our goal is to effectively engage and empower men as allies, we need to address and counter the ways that these norms are played out and experienced in men's lives.

Finally, for men, there are different sets of consequences for intervening than women face. Men like and want to be "one of the guys." And most of us have learned (often via some pretty harmful experiences) that being "one of the guys" means going along when other men make statements like these. So making a statement risks not being "one of the guys." This is not an insignificant risk. Many men's identity is tied into being one of the guys, so if he's not one of the guys, what is he?

Outlining these differences is not to suggest that men "have it harder" in terms of doing something effectively to intervene or prevent sexual or domestic violence. The point here is to outline that these differences exist and to emphasize that if we aim to be effective in engaging men as bystanders, then we need to reach men from where they are at and develop strategies that are designed with men and men's experiences in mind.

An additional challenge faced by men with regards to bystander intervention efforts is that there is a moment in the process where we have to choose who to "stand by" -- do we intervene in a way that positions us as "standing by" women, or do we intervene in a way that positions us to "stand by" other men? For most people, our default position is to stand by people who are like us. It is a significant challenge to get people to stand by "others." We see this dynamic played out in countless scenarios when exploring bystander intervention across lines of difference. So we are not only seeking to empower men to act as bystanders, we are also aiming to empower men to "stand by" an "other" (women) in this process.

This is one of the reasons that many of the male engagement strategies using something like an "ally" notion as a part of their bystander intervention efforts. We are inviting, empowering and supporting men not only to stand up (as opposed to stand by) but also to stand up in a particular way -- *as an ally*.

Towards Being an Ally

An ally is someone who speaks out against and takes action to prevent gender based violence. Being an ally includes both responding to situations, and being proactive. For example, responding when someone makes a victim-blaming statement ("why would she go up to his room "for drinks"?). Acting as an ally in a proactive way includes something as simple as wearing a T-shirt proclaiming that you "take a stand against rape." Anne Braden said, about being an ally: "the two most important things you can do as an ally is to be *visible* and be *vocal*." Applying this to men means to provide men with the tools, examples, models and ways that they can publicly voice their position to rape, domestic violence and other forms of gender based violence; and provide means by which they can be visible about their opposition.

One of the gender-specific barriers to becoming an ally (as described above) that men face, is a belief that by acting as an ally with women and girls, men defining themselves as not “one of the guys.” Most men have experienced consequences for “siding with girls” ranging from being ostracized to brutal bullying. So, invitations to be an ally can often be experienced by men as an invitation to be ostracized or bullied – an invitation few of us are inclined to accept. Many men assume that by trying to ally with women, will result in them being isolated from other men

This dynamic is reinforced because men have tend to have a limited toolkit in how to be an ally with women. The main ways that men know to ally with women, particularly as it relates to men’s violence against women and girls, is to become aggressive against the man. This limits men’s willingness and ability to act as an ally.

One of the most effective ways to engage men around this barrier is to offer them the option allying with women in girls in ways that builds our alliance with men and boys – and then providing them with resources, information, and models about how to do so.

*Engaging men as allies with all women
In ways that helps them build alliances with other men*

One of the core lessons from ally theory and practice is that it is very hard to be an effective ally in isolation. Effectively allyship occurs when aspiring allies are in a group of other folks who are also working on their role as an ally. This not only provides some social and emotional support as people engage in this learning curve, but it also creates a sense of social cohesion that individuals take with them. If one is part of a social group that has created a social norm expecting and supporting each other to act as an ally when situations arise, then the individuals within that social group are more likely to see more situations, and are more likely to act when they do see these situations.