

New study shows how male allies can combat sexism—or contribute to it

November 12 2019, by Amy McCaig



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Male allies can play a powerful role in combating chauvinistic behavior toward women but they can also unintentionally contribute to sexism, according to a new study from a social psychologist at Rice University.

"Helping or Hurting? Understanding Women's Perceptions of Male Allies" examines sex-based discrimination toward [women](#) in the workplace. Eden King, an associate professor of psychology at Rice and the study's senior author, said the research was prompted by an increase in the number of sex-based discrimination charges filed with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in recent years.

"A lot of research has already been done about how women can fight sexism in the workplace," King said. "What we were interested in studying was how men play a role in this."

King and her fellow authors evaluated 100 women of varying ethnicities, ranging in age from 19 to 69, with total work experience ranging from one to 50 years. These women took an [online survey](#) about male ally [behavior](#) in the workplace and were asked to recall situations when they thought their male allies were effective or ineffective in helping them fight sexism.

The researchers found that men can effectively act as allies in a number of ways, including doing things to advance a woman's career (such as offering special projects or promotions), putting a stop to bad behavior by peers or simply lending support when they're asked.

The women surveyed described a number of positive side effects from having male allies, including feeling grateful, happy, confident, empowered, supported and more comfortable in their workplace.

"The ally's behavior made me feel valued and 'heard,'" one participant wrote.

However, the women answering the survey also pointed out situations where male allies did more harm than good. Women most frequently described allyship as ineffective when it had no impact on sexist

behavior or organizational culture, or when they or their ally experienced backlash over their actions. Some women also described situations where male allies' behavior hindered their careers. One woman described how a colleague with a negative reputation tried to promote her, but his support ultimately led to her contract not being renewed.

"When we did this study, we were concerned that not everything people do believing they are acting as an ally is actually construed that way," King said. "And we discovered that this is very true."

A less [common experience](#) the surveyed women reported was when male allies exhibited a "savior complex," when a male ally steps in to help or intervene on behalf of a woman who doesn't want or need his help.

"The participants indicated that this type of behavior made them feel less confident in their ability to fulfill their job responsibilities," King said.

Ultimately, the researchers said that male allies should take cues from their female colleagues about how they can be an ally. Some common forms of allyship described as helpful were listening and being a confidante behind the scenes, in addition to taking steps that ensure women get the same opportunities as men, including promotions and raises.

"While we found that allies can have a very positive impact, we encourage these individuals to confer with their female colleagues to see if help is wanted or needed," King said. "If the answer is yes, then allies should keep doing what they are doing. If the answer is no, they should respect that."

Provided by Rice University

Citation: New study shows how male allies can combat sexism—or contribute to it (2019, November 12) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-11-male-allies-combat-sexismor-contribute.html>

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