

GENDER

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Men Step Up to Support Women's Rights and Fight Violence ... Stars and Regular Guys Say They Are Ready to Show Up

Male feminism is a burgeoning movement around the country.

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May 13, 2013 | In the immediate aftermath of the Steubenville, Ohio rape trial, many men, both prominent and not, spoke out against sexism, misogyny and what has become known as "rape culture."

"All men should be feminists," Grammy-winning singer John Legend announced. "If men care about women's rights, the world will be a better place." Olympian sprinter Andrew Reyes, Virginia Democratic senators Mark Warner and Tim Kaine, and Philadelphia Eagles defensive tackle Ronnie Cameron also got into the act, pledging their allegiance to the movement to end rape, sexual assault and domestic abuse.

One of my favorite reactions came from a young man named Charles that went viral on Facebook. Charles was photographed holding a hand-lettered [sign](#) that said, "I stand with Jane Doe because when I became a victim of a sex crime, no one asked me if I was drunk or what I was wearing or what I had done to make it happen."

For at least some men, [it seemed to be a click moment](#). Nonetheless, questions lurked in many women's minds. Were these outspoken men truly embracing feminism or were they simply appalled by one horrendously awful incident? And, if they were claiming to be feminists, what exactly did that mean? Were they seeking to break down a rigid binary that positions men and women as gender opposites, or were they instead focusing more narrowly and working to end the behaviors that too often result in sexual assault?

Most women, whether part of the organized women's movement or not, wanted to support this apparent groundswell of pro-feminist and anti-rape sentiment. At the same time, suspicion and distrust began to kick in. After all, the past four decades have seen overt anti-feminist backlash and the development of men's groups that are hostile to the idea of women's equality and the breakdown of ironclad gender categories. For example, [Promise Keepers](#), an evangelical



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Christian men's group, reinforces the notion of male dominance within (always heterosexual) marriage and family life. Secular groups such as the [National Coalition for Men](#) are equally male supremacist and promote the idea of male victimhood, purporting that women batter men and boys as frequently as the reverse. Their response to the renewal of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) speaks volumes: "Boys, men and fathers increasingly will die at the hands of their violent mothers and wives as our worthless elected officials rush to issue press releases and pat themselves on the back, claiming victory for having ended 'the War on Women.'"

Proof that women batter as frequently as men? It's [nowhere to be found](#).

In addition, a mythopoetic movement inspired by poet Robert Bly and Jungian psychologist Joseph Campbell encourages the cultivation of men's "inner warrior" and masculine voice. While some mythopoeists are apolitical, other mythopoetic strands posit men as sexism's primary victims—yes, trumping women—because of socially imposed rules about gender roles and propriety. This ideology has led them to oppose the notion of gender as learned performance (a theory put forward by Judith Butler, Michel Foucault and others) and instead champion a worldview in which male and female are distinct species.

But let's get back to the burgeoning movement of 21st-century male feminists, purportedly egalitarian individuals and groups that are taking aim at misogyny and the double standard that continues to limit who and what men and women—however they self-define—can be.

Sonia Ossorio, president of the [New York City Chapter of the National Organization for Women](#), welcomes the spike in men's involvement. "Just as in politics, you can't get anything accomplished if you don't work both sides of the aisle," she says. What's more, she says women's attitudes toward men have shifted. "The Catholic Church abuse scandal ignited a change and people now realize that men can be victims, that abuse is as hurtful to men and boys as it is to women and girls."

Recognizing this, writer and advocate Mandy Van Deven says, is an outgrowth of efforts to promote intersectionality, the linking of oppressions. "The idea of gender equity did not really permeate broad activist circles until the last decade or so," she says. "When intersectionality became more of an organizing principle among liberal and radical activists, when people began to talk more about social justice as a multi-issue movement, it opened the door for men to feel more comfortable in feminist spaces." The downside, she says, is that movements are sometimes taken over by those who have traditionally held power, and money and attention can then get diverted from programs benefiting women and girls and given to programs run by and for men. Lastly, she says, some men who take on feminist issues "act as if they're special and more deserving of accolades" than the women who've been working on these concerns for decades.

Still, for the most part, contemporary feminists are eager to include men in their organizing efforts. [Choice USA](#), a national reproductive justice group, recently launched Bro-Choice, "to disrupt the dominant narrative that reproductive justice is a woman's issue," and groups including NOW and NARAL Pro-Choice America encourage male involvement and gender equity.

It's an increasingly palatable message, according to New York artist Linda Stein. Stein has created a traveling exhibit/lecture that she calls "The Fluidity of Gender." During the past three years she has taken the project to 16 colleges and museums across the US. "There are now men who are very much on the same page as feminists. They are trying to understand feminism and are open to listening and learning from women. I've seen a big change in attitude which I think comes from increased talk about bullying. My audiences are young, old, male, female, straight, gay and questioning, and they are getting the fact that masculinity and femininity are fluid

categories. They get that it is not horrible for a man to be nurturing and raise a child. Obviously, we are nowhere near gender equity but each year I do this presentation I hear less hostility from men.”

Stein finds this development extremely encouraging. Nonetheless, she is acutely aware that it is essential for men to reach out to other men and boys. While numerous programs run by men, for men, exist, most are confined to stopping sexual violence, with only baby steps being taken to deconstruct mainstream ideas about gender or promote the fluidity Stein champions.

The exception is academia, where groups like the [American Men's Studies Association](#) are ostensibly working—at least on paper and on screen-- to encourage the questioning of gender norms and theorize about how best to advance “the critical study of men and masculinity.”

But even this can be contested terrain. A.B., an untenured professor at a college affiliated with the City University of New York, reports that despite efforts to eradicate sexism and promote tolerance on campus, progress has been glacial—and not just in the classroom.

Unlike Linda Stein's perception, A.B. says that male faculty “who claim to be feminists—and who write books and articles and deliver papers on the subject-- are often the worst colleagues. At least at the colleges in which I have worked, it seems as if the more vocal they are about their feminism, the more willing they are to use gender discrepancies to their own advantage. They delegate more service work and more work-intensive teaching assignments to female colleagues, and simultaneously congratulate themselves (not to mention increase their own opportunities for promotion through increased time for research) for offering such 'opportunities' to them. In many cases, claiming feminism is just another way for them to see themselves as better than the average person on the street. Their sexism has moved underground, and is better cloaked, but it is still obvious.”

A.B. is not the only academic to be disgusted by the veiled sexism she has encountered. C.D., a psychology professor who asked that neither her name nor her college be revealed, says she has seen so-called feminist men pressure female colleagues to have sex, as if doing so will liberate them from the constraints of bourgeois convention. She says these encounters invariably result in awkward personal dynamics that hamper productivity and limit scholarly collaboration.

It's the kind of stuff that makes you want to crawl into a hole or scream in despair, at least temporarily. But as the responses to Steubenville indicate, many men are beginning to ask themselves why so many of their brothers rape, batter their partners, and think themselves superior. The resources of several longstanding feminist men's groups are helping them formulate answers and strategize about changing male behavior.

The National Organization of Men Against Sexism (NOMAS) is one of the oldest efforts. (It has changed its name from the National Organization for Men, to the National Organization for Changing Men, to the current name, NOMAS.)

Robert Brannon, a retired college professor and member of the NOMAS National Council, recalls that, “back in 1975, a professor named Sharon Lord taught a women's studies class at a college in Knoxville, Tennessee. Male students attended the class and she gave them a project: to plan and carry out the first national conference on men and masculinity. The conference was a big success. The second conference, in 1976, was scheduled to take place at Penn State, but a week before it was supposed to begin Penn State kicked the event off campus because of a program stance supportive of gay rights. Everything moved to a Holiday Inn.”

By 1980, Brannon continues, it became clear to many conferees that an annual gathering organized by an ad hoc committee was insufficient and a call was issued to not only plan the next confab, but to create a men's group that would be pro-gay, pro-feminist, anti-racist, and open to challenging prevalent gender stereotypes.

"Many of us who got involved early on had come through the civil rights movement and all of us had been influenced by it," Brannon says. "We wanted to be on the side of justice and right. At the same time we realized that if we were just a men's auxiliary to the women's movement, we weren't offering much. We began to see the average Joe as a victim of sex roles. The demands on men—to control our emotions, to focus on work, to not have intimate friendships with other men—impoverishes us and we can live happier and more fulfilled lives if we unlearn social roles regarding gender."

Self-interest, as well as overarching support for women's equality, became central organizing precepts for NOMAS and the many men's groups that have formed over the past 35 years.

Ted Bunch is the co-founder of [A Call to Men](#), a 10-year-old organization whose website says it, "works to create a world where all men and boys are loving and respectful and all women and girls are valued and safe."

"We were born out of the battered women's movement," Bunch told AlterNet. "Myself and Call co-founder Tony Porter were working with domestic violence offenders. From that work it became clear to us that men who batter have a lot in common with men who don't. Batterers use violence selectively and direct it at women. It seemed to us that these guys had good anger management skills—they did not hit their bosses or coworkers. They could control themselves but had been taught to see women as objects and as property. This idea is embedded in most men, even those who don't assault women. Most hold a belief that they should have the final word, that females are there to serve them."

During the 10 years of Call's existence Bunch estimates they've spoken to 100,000 boys and men in 30 states and seven countries. "We were forced to learn how to package and translate the message in a way that men can receive it," he says. "It can't sound like an indictment." One of the keys, he adds, is speaking openly and honestly. "I talk about times when I wanted to tell my son not to cry, but then realized that he needed to express his hurt and fear. We talk about the fact that men can show anger; that's the one emotion that is safe for us, but we have not been given the okay to show other feelings."

Call to Men asks why this is so and also questions the role of homophobia in keeping men from bonding. "Homophobia stops men from getting involved in work that is supportive of women," he says. "It makes us afraid to embrace each other or give affection to our sons. In addition, when you address homophobia you always get into bullying and challenge it since the bullied are often boys who don't present with hyper-masculinity."

Maintaining good relationships with women's groups, Bunch says, is central to all Call's work. "When we first formed the women we reached out to were welcoming but a bit skeptical," Bunch says. "Why would men do this work? Could they trust us? There was a fear that we'd do what men often do: Come in, take over, and say, 'Thank you, little lady.' Our board is majority women and we now have a good track record so this reaction has lessened."

A Call to Men is presently working with coaches to discuss better ways to train athletes and model behavior that is less aggressive and rigid. CBS sportscaster James Brown and Baltimore Ravens' defensive lineman Chris Canty are working with Bunch and other Call staff to reach this

demographic.

Like A Call to Men, the Washington, DC-based [Men Can Stop Rape](#) challenges male supremacist attitudes and develops strategies to support non-violence. Through Men of Strength (MOST) clubs, mentors work with middle- and high-school-aged boys to discuss healthy relationships, empathy, machismo and essentialist beliefs about gender. The year-long program brings football players, computer geeks and troublemakers together and gives them 45 to 60 minutes a week to think and talk about masculinity. According to Patrick McGann, director of strategy and planning, "The goal is to make these young guys become change-makers in their schools, families and communities."

The group has also launched a poster campaign of attention-grabbing artwork that is visible at bus stops and train stations throughout the District of Columbia, to make men aware of what they can do to stop abuse and harassment. "When Karl kept harassing girls on the street, I said: Stop being a jerk. I'm the kind of guy who takes a stand," says one poster. Another depicts a crowded party: "When Nicole couldn't lose that drunk guy, I called her cell to give her an out," says another.

Schools need to pay for MOST's 24-week curriculum -- something cash-strapped programs often cannot do -- but Men Can Stop Rape also promotes dialogue through social media and its website. In addition, a grant has enabled it to partner with youth-advocacy agencies across the US to create a Healthy Masculinity Action project. The project is hosting town hall meetings throughout the country and sponsoring campus conversations to explore gender roles and promote women's equality and non-violence. "We are basing the project on the assumption that the majority of men can be made to care about these issues and will do something to change their behavior. It's about persuading men to care and act," McGann says.

These three organizations are far from alone. Over the past few years, an array of websites have sprouted up, making clear that men are eager to engage with women around gender, sex roles, feminism, patriarchy and sexism. They include: XYonline.net, malefeminists.com, voicemalemagazine.org, blackmasculinities.com, goodmenproject.com, everydayfeminism.com and the Five Minute Feminist on YouTube.


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