

Men and Feminism: Structural, Symbolic and Practical Accountability

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The gender demographics of higher education are changing (Hussar, 2005). More women than men are enrolling and graduating on college campuses, and by 2020 the Department of Education predicts 60% of enrolled college students will be women (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). The reasons and potential implications for this shift in gender demographics are complex, potentially far reaching, and often debated in academic and popular media. The media frame the success of girls and women in education and the disengagement of boys and college men as a "Boy Crisis" (<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3032542/site/newsweek/>).

Regardless of the rhetoric surrounding this demographic change, more resources, human and fiscal, are being allocated to understanding, recruiting, engaging and retaining men on college campuses. This has become apparent in NASPA through the creation of the new Knowledge Community (KC), Men and Masculinities (<http://www.naspa.org/communities/kc/community.cfm?kcid=25>). Positions are being created at campuses across the country designed to engage college men and get them connected with campus programs and resources. These positions often focus on preventing sexual assault, for virtually 100% of rapists are men (Tjaden & Thoennesm 2000). The struggle to end sexual assault has been an issue for the feminist movement since the first wave of feminism (Rowe-Finkbeiner, 2004). Still the rate of sexual assault is alarming, with one in four college women being the survivor of an attempted or completed sexual assault before she turns 25 (Douglas, Collins, Warren, Kann, Gold, Clayton, Ross, & Kolbe, 1997). Feminists and pro-feminist men are collectively working to end sexual violence. A demonstrated commitment to end sexual assault is apparent at national sexual assault conferences, which are increasingly attended by men. This gender shift in sexual assault prevention work often brings a desire from both women and men for mutual accountability. A need for accountability is similar for any ally work by a member of a privileged group. This discussion will focus on men operating in the feminist movement, and explore the dynamics of practical, symbolic and structural accountability.

Men and Feminism

The naming of men who identify as feminist has been debated for several decades. It has been advanced that men cannot experience the oppression of sexism in the same way women can, therefore they must identify as "pro-feminist" and not feminist. (Kimmel & Mosmiller, 1992). Regardless of naming, many contemporary feminists call for enlisting men as allies in the struggle to end sexism (Faludi, 1999; Hong, 2000; hooks, 2000). The history of pro-feminist men can be traced back to 1776 in the United States (Kimmel & Mosmiller, 1992). Men are drawn to feminism for countless reasons, including the longing to end gendered violence and the desire to challenge the gender socialization that often leaves men emotionless and disconnected from society (Faludi, 1999; Funk, 1993).

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National organizations such as NOMAS (The National Organization for Men Against Sexism, <http://www.nomas.org/>) have existed since the early 1970's, with national Men and Masculinities conferences occurring annually since 1975 (<http://www.nomas.org/conferences.html>). Currently conferences such as the Annual Conference on the College Male (<http://www.csbsju.edu/menscenter/conference/default.htm>) exist for feminist and pro-feminist men to examine the current state of men and masculinities, and to share research and programmatic interventions. Pro-feminist men, their conferences, research and associations appear to be in society and higher education permanently.

Subsequently, an analysis of different kinds of accountability as related to sexual assault prevention and gender education work becomes important. The "Pro-Feminist Men's Movement" as articulated by the above referenced organizations espouses a focus on accountability, yet they sometimes fail to ensure and solicit feedback. If the "Pro-Feminist Men's Movement" is going to strive for accountability, and feminists are requesting and willing to engage in such partnership, a discussion on the dynamics of such collaboration can be productive in creating a shared understanding. The following discussion will explore

Symbolic Accountability

Symbolic accountability can include courtesy acts of communication, co-sponsorship, and gestures of partnership. Examples include letting individuals know about programs, seeking feedback, establishing co-programming and displaying other office or departments names or logos on media material. Symbolic accountability may run the risk of being tokenizing when the initiator does not truly desire partnership and information sharing. Student affairs practitioners should, therefore, strive to supplement symbolic gestures with the creation of a more streamlined and reciprocal accountability.

Practical Accountability

Practical accountability can be sought out, or can become inherent as relationships develop. Pro-feminist men can develop relationships with individuals who then become allies in ongoing conversations and programmatic initiatives. Such partnerships can develop into mutually beneficial relationships, deepening the mutual understanding of issues. This can take the form of ongoing co-sponsorships or monthly information sharing meetings. Practical accountability, however, must be maintained and revisited. Individuals can become apathetic and sometimes avoid the authentic reflection that is the cornerstone of accountability. Practical accountability is sometimes time consuming and cumbersome, whereas structural accountability inherently mandates communication and responsibility for intent and impact.

Structural Accountability

Structural accountability requires intentional and proactive thinking. When hiring, reorganizing or establishing reporting structures, an emphasis on structural accountability can educate decisions. One such example exists at Colorado State University. The Director of the Office of Women's Programs and Studies saw a gap in the sexual assault prevention taking place at the University.

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Subsequently, a position was created for a pro-feminist man to coordinate campus activities designed at gender education and sexual assault prevention. The position is housed in the Office of Women's Programs and Studies, with the Coordinator reporting directly to the office Director.

This subsequent configuration ensures symbolic accountability through proximity and everyday collaboration and conversations as fostered in a shared work-space. Practical accountability occurs through ongoing vision-shaping meetings, intentional feedback sessions, and an intentional reciprocal balance of challenge and support. Finally structural accountability is assured through reporting structures.

Recommendations

Ideal accountability hinges on relationships. Individuals seeking accountability, as with all allies, must be proactive in establishing relationships. While people from oppressed groups may be tired of educating allies, when a relationship is established more opportunity exists for reciprocation. Establishing relationships must not be tokenizing, but representative of sincere aspirations for mutual benefit by both parties. Allies seeking such accountability and relationships must do their own education before and during relationship establishment. Reading, attending programs, and participating in campus/community events can supplement, but not replace, vital self-reflection for allies. Pro-feminist men can be proactive in establishing relationships by becoming involved in local, regional, national and international advocacy and awareness-raising organizations.

If pro-feminist men and other allies are going to seek accountability, they must be willing to hear feedback without becoming counterproductively defensive. This may not be easy, yet it is an essential component of true accountability. Accountability sometimes means direct criticism of programs, initiatives or language. Pro-feminist men would do well to practice receiving direct and sometimes personal feedback. While not always easy to hear, constructive criticism from feminists should be received as a compliment. Such feedback reflects hope and confidence in the allies' intentions and demonstrates a belief that the individual can grow and learn. The struggle for belonging, identity and accountability as a pro-feminist man is not easy, yet for the pro-feminist "Men's Movement" it is imperative for eradicating sexism and gendered violence, including domestic violence and rape.

As positions for pro-feminist men continue to be created at institutions of higher education, proactively thinking about accountability can help ensure mutually beneficial ongoing relationships. In the struggle to end sexism, the liberation of men and women are inherently intertwined. This partnership is effectively summed up by the following quotation, applicable to all allies working for change. "If you have come to help me, please go home. But if you have come because your liberation is somehow bound with mine, then we may work together" (Australian Aboriginal Woman). Pro-feminist men must be willing to seek out and maintain symbolic, practical and structural accountability to ensure a mutually beneficial feminist movement.

Citations

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