

## Women's Experiences with "Male Allies"

*"Get the hell out of my race  
and give me those numbers!!"*

In the discourse on "male allyship<sup>1</sup>," a timeless example is Kathrine Switzer, the first woman to complete the Boston Marathon as a numbered entrant. It was 1967 and women weren't allowed to participate in the marathon. During her run, race official Jock Semple tried to stop Switzer and grab her official bib. But Switzer was able to finish the race because Semple was blocked by Thomas Miller, who was one of Switzer's team mates. Miller's action is emblematic of the work of men allies, which is to help remove obstacles so that women are able to fulfill their potential and make an impact.

Recently, men allyship has gained visibility both as a role that individual men take up, and an organizational strategy for enhancing gender equity. The Simmons Men Allies Research Team has developed a definition<sup>2</sup> of men allyship as a role that men take up to use their power to build an inclusive and equitable organizational culture. Our definition includes the two main roles of the man ally:

1. Advocate, encourage, and support individual women
2. Work to remove organizational barriers for all women

To provide more validation and understanding of the strategy of engaging men as allies, the team surveyed attendees at the 2018 Simmons Leadership Conferences in Boston and Dublin. Our purpose was to learn about the attendees' understanding of men allies, and the role that these men have played in supporting and advancing their careers. We specified that we would be asking about the actions and attitudes of people who identify as men, and that we defined men allies as "those men who are visibly and actively supportive of women in leadership and gender equity."<sup>3</sup> Demographics of the participants can be found in the end notes.<sup>4</sup>

### The Promise of Men Allies

Our survey respondents reinforced the importance of men acting as men allies. In fact, 97% agreed that men should be involved in addressing gender equity in the workplace. The remaining 2% said they weren't sure" and only one respondent had a negative response. Responses to other questions showed that there is a wide variety of experiences with men allies in the workforce. Our results show a surprisingly high level of allyship in organizations, as well as suggesting areas where more work needs to be done, both with individual men and at the organizational level.

**Our research team recognizes that "male allies" is the term in popular use, which is why our survey questions use this language. For our writing, however, and going forward, we have decided to use "men allies" to be inclusive of all people identifying or presenting as men. It also better represents the targeted subjects for this particular gender equity endeavor.**

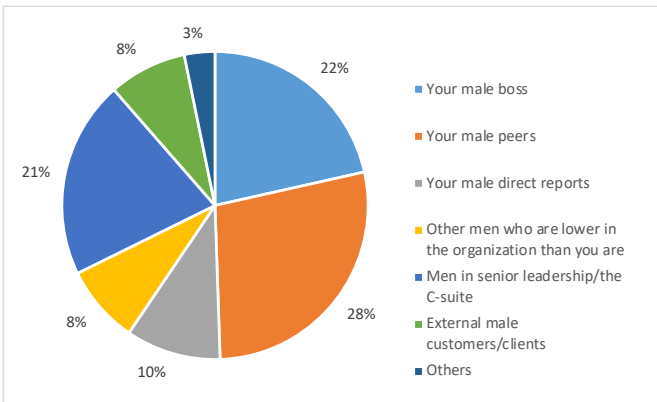
### Do women have men allies in their organizations?

We found that nearly 75% of respondents said that there are individual men in their current organizations who have acted as allies. However, 13% didn't see men allies in their current organizations, with an additional 12% who weren't sure. It is telling that a noticeable number of women in our study don't feel that men have taken on the role of men allies. This finding is particularly important given research on the organizational benefits of men's involvement in improving gender diversity. In their global study, Krentz and his colleagues found that when men are directly involved, 96% of men and women believe that

their company is making greater progress towards gender equity. In companies where men are not involved, this perception of progress drops to 30%<sup>5</sup>. Organizational leaders can't afford to ignore the issue of the involvement of men in supporting women and actively promoting gender equity.

**Where do women see men acting as allies?**

Women were asked to share the roles held by men who acted as allies. Their responses are in the table below.



The most commonly cited group was male peers, in contrast to the usual image of a men ally as a powerful senior man. This finding is noteworthy given research that male peers often judge women more harshly. Ibarra and Obaru conducted a study of the 360 assessments of 2816 female executives.<sup>6</sup> As they explored trends in the data, they found that one group consistently pulled women's scores down – male peers. Ibarra and Obaru hypothesize that these lower ratings may be a result of competition that male peers feel towards their female colleagues. Our findings, as well as those of other researchers, suggest that while women may garner support from men in different roles and positions, it is worth their effort to pay attention to who is supporting them and what the impetus is for that support. This research also shows that although senior executives are an important source of allyship, the pool of men who may act as allies is much larger.

**What actions do men allies take on behalf of women?**

Participants were asked an open-ended question: "What actions (if any) have men taken to support your career?" Our survey respondents identified many actions, which we have grouped into the following categories:

- 1) Mentoring and sponsorship

- 2) Career advice, feedback and coaching
- 3) Encouragement, motivation, building confidence, emotional support and listening
- 4) Power-opportunities, connections, strong references, authorizing, hiring, promotion, and pay raises

These categories illustrate the breadth of career advancement support men allies have provided by using their access and power. One respondent noted:

*My first boss helped me find a new role that matched my interests and abilities. Another male boss continues to check in on my career growth at the company. Another championed a project on collaboration that I started. My current boss gives me productive feedback, and has nominated me for several award. My father expresses his support and belief in my intelligence regularly. My brother is encouraging also in my job searches.*

The support that men allies offer has extended beyond traditional sponsorship behaviors to also offer important personal (or developmental) support. These activities included encouraging psychological strength, providing encouragement and motivation, building confidence, and acting as sounding boards and listeners.

*Men around me have been extremely supportive of me in a leadership role. They constantly motivate me and allow me to grow my skillset as well as leadership skills to manage my team.*

Interestingly, when women were asked about what men had done, the responses were not always positive. A number of them answered, "Nothing." Some respondents described their experiences with men as either neutral or even negative. As much as we focus on the positive behaviors that men offer women, it is as important to delve further into these negative responses that suggest that at times men may not be acting as allies, and may even be blockers. One respondent described her encounters:

*No action; in fact men are acting against my career progress; men are favoring other men in their teams, yet make me and other female teammates work hard and keep us accountable. But no career progression.*

Amanda Rose describes categories of men who may act as blockers of women, from the "middle manager" (who may see women as a threat) to the "Old Boy" (who wants to ensure that he is surrounded by those like himself).

Thinking about the categories of blockers will help develop strategies to circumvent challenges in enlisting men in the support of women.<sup>7</sup>

### Additional Insights on Men Allies

We asked respondents, “Is there anything else you think we should know about men allies?”

They had a number of suggestions to guide men acting as men allies: 1) deepening their cultural awareness/education; 2) navigating recognition of their role as allies; 3) engaging in ally training; and 4) walking the talk. Respondents also expressed both hope and concern about the role that women can take in acting as allies to other women.

The theme that emerged is that they want to see leaders “Walk the Talk.” It is not enough to say that male allyship is important. The actions that back up the importance of this source of support for women’s leadership are critical.

### Opportunities to Strengthen Men’s Role as Men Allies

#### Cultural Awareness/Education

Men acting as allies need to have cultural awareness and education—these factors lay the ground work for effective allyship. Understanding the organizational context, including norms and practices that retard women’s careers, is a necessary first step in the work of removing barriers and changing those organizational norms.

*While I think they are often well-intentioned, [but] because many of them [men] have never experienced unfair questions in the hiring process, “different” treatment during pregnancy or the early child-rearing years, non-inclusion in lunches, sporting events or other extracurriculars, or sexual harassment, men don’t truly understand what it’s like to be a woman in the workplace and may not be an effective ally unless they...at least begin to understand.*

### Recognition of Men Allies

One of the less obvious challenges that men who take on the ally role face is around the issue of how their support of women is recognized in their organizations. One of the responses to male allyship is backlash; men who act as allies may even be punished. Johnson and Smith identified ways that men acting as allies are penalized. Men may be perceived as not masculine enough (“wimp factor”) or they may be concerned with being perceived as too feminine (“stigma-by-association”)<sup>8</sup>. An observation raised by some of the participants is that men may not want to be recognized; they may prefer to keep a low profile while being allies. This ambivalence may be related to (or an indicator of) workplace culture and policies on gender equity.

*They need to be rewarded for their actions it will motivate more men to follow and create a culture of awareness around the subject*

If the organization has more open and well-accepted initiatives on gender equity, there may be greater incentives for men to be recognized in public for being allies, and to act as role models that motivate others to follow suit.

### Ally Training

There should be no assumption that men know exactly how to be allies or what kinds of allyship behaviors will be more positively received.

*I think that often men are made to feel they do not have the time, political resources, or correct values to advocate for women. I think it will take helping men allies think creatively about their strengths and resources to increase allyship in practice.*

Research provides some insight into why men may be reluctant to act as allies. Wiley and Dunn’s study describes two different styles of support: autonomy-oriented help (taking a backseat and offering partial support) and dependency-oriented help (attempts to solve problems and impose their will). Men who employ an Autonomy-Oriented style may be more positively received, in part, because they modulate their power in a manner that invites partnerships with women. In contrast, men allies who employ a Dependency-Oriented style may be experienced as exerting their power in a manner that is overbearing and presumptuous. Both factors, different styles of support and different modes of power, suggest that practice and training on effective allyship is critical.

## Walking the Talk

Respondents were very clear that they wanted to see more rigorous efforts to promote male allyship. The theme that emerged is that they want to see leaders “Walk the Talk.” It is not enough to say that male allyship is important. The actions that back up the importance of this source of support for women’s leadership are critical. When there is not clear action supporting men allies, respondents see this as lip service and empty promises. Women are wary of efforts that are not backed up by critical organizational support.

*Proof is in the pudding. How many women executives or female employees do they hire and promote*

Men who are effective men allies need to be clear about their motivation, skillful in their implementation and decisive in their actions. The importance of men allies in moving from “talking to walking” is significant.

## The Power of Women Supporting Women

With all of the talk about men allies, the role that women can take in promoting and supporting the career advancement of other women may not have been sufficiently explored. There are two opposing views on the perspective of senior women’s support of more junior women. One perspective is that women who are in leadership positions do not necessarily act as allies or sources of support for other women. Sterk, Meeusen, and Van Laar investigate the existence and impact of the Queen Bee Syndrome. The Queen Bee Syndrome is described as women presenting themselves more like men, distancing themselves from other women, and endorsing the current gender hierarchy<sup>9</sup>. They note that simply having women in more senior leadership positions will not necessarily benefit junior women. In fact, they find that when female leaders display Queen Bee behaviors, junior women are negatively affected.

*To be honest, I think we still have more work to do with women. I have experienced more women throwing their peers under the bus far more than men.*

A second perspective is that there isn’t a Queen Bee phenomenon and that senior women do provide support for more junior women. Arvate, Galilea and Todescat describe the Queen Bee Syndrome as a myth; they find that senior

women act in a benevolent fashion towards more junior women. Rather than Queen Bees, they describe women leaders as “Regal Leaders”<sup>10</sup>.

*Regarding my answer about not seeing male allies at work: my women allies are the ones who go to bat for me and who mentor me; not the males.*

Litwin writes about the work relationships between women in a much more nuanced manner. She offers five patterns of interaction, characterized by a range of behaviors, including gossip and indirect aggression. She counsels that “women’s relationships in the workplace take place in the context of gender-socialized friendship expectations in a “man’s world”<sup>11</sup>. Regardless of which perspective is in operation, they speak to the need for further study of and attention to whether and how women act as allies to other women.

## The Dark Side of Men Allies and Gender Gatekeeping

Prior research by Ronit Kark on what she termed “gender gatekeeping”<sup>12</sup> prompted us to ask respondents, “What is your reaction to men’s voluntary initiatives to promote gender equity?” The bulk of women appreciated these efforts, with 73% indicating that they “really appreciate the support.” But 26% of the women were more ambivalent about their appreciation for men’s support – 18% indicated that they were somewhat appreciative, 7% were neutral and 1% noted that they were either “somewhat unappreciative of their support” or “really unappreciative of their support.”

Gender gatekeeping behaviors include different forms of resistance to men’s involvement in gender equity efforts, such as resisting the “knight in shining armor,” resisting the idea of inequity, and framing topics as exclusively related to women (Kark, 2018).

Responses to the question “which of the following characterize your feelings about the men’s initiatives to promote

gender equity?” indicated more cautionary reactions to men’s support. A moderate percentage of our respondents (29%) indicated negative reactions to men’s efforts. Some women felt that “men were patronizing and paternalistic” (12%) or that “men should leave this for women to address because they don’t have a full understanding of women’s experiences” (1%). A striking finding is that 52% of this subgroup of respondents indicate that they feel that “men have self-serving motivations for these initiatives.” Some women don’t see the need for these initiatives, with 2% of the respondents to this question indicating that “there is no gender inequality that they need to address.”

Results from this study (and other work) suggest that we should not assume that all women are receptive to the initiatives that are being offered to involve men in the quest to promote gender equity. Men acting as allies may be questioned about the motives for their involvement. This research underscores the importance of the manner in which the initiatives are implemented. These two issues of motivation for and implementation of male initiatives for gender equity have the potential to influence how these initiatives are received and, possibly, their effectiveness.

## Directions for Future Research and Best Practices

There are many questions that can be explored in future research efforts, both at the individual and organizational level. Some of these include:

Men allies and work with individual women:

- What are the differences in the experiences across diverse groups of women – do we see racial or class differences in who has access to men allies?
- What are the challenges facing men acting as men allies?
- Are women who are highly satisfied with their careers more likely to report having men allies? This was one of our hypotheses that we were unable to test, since the women in our study reported high levels of satisfaction with their career progression.

Men allies as an organizational strategy:

- What characteristics of organizations enable and encourage men allies?

- What are the organizational benefits of promoting men allyship? What is the impact and outcome of these efforts?
- How do organizations prepare men to be allies?
- As organizations work to create contexts that support women and their career progression, what are concrete, substantive steps that can be taken?

## Conclusion

The use of men allies can prove to be an effective force in chipping away at stubborn organizational norms and practices that hinder women’s progress. But taking up this role is going to require that men acknowledge the power that is culturally bestowed to them. They will also need to recognize opportunities to utilize that power in service of gender-equity actions. These actions are no longer optional; organizations’ ability to be competitive and viable will depend on all organizational citizens, including women, bringing their full array of talents to bear. Seeking and attaining gender-equity is a win-win: people benefit and so do organizations.

The picture of Kathrine Switzer being supported in her race to complete the Boston Marathon changed the world of competitive racing.<sup>13</sup> Switzer’s determination in the face of vitriol is often cited as an example of the resilience and strength needed to surmount the barriers and challenges to gender equity found in organizations. What is not discussed is the cadre of men who supported Switzer. She had a host of men allies, including the man who trained with her, the man who made sure she had a sense of the course by taking her over it the night before the race, and the group of men who signed up with her to run the race. Even seemingly small actions by men who use their positions of power and privilege to promote gender equity can make lasting positive impacts on both individual women leaders and organizations.



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**ENDNOTES**

1. There are several points which clarify our use of the word ‘men’ in this article. We are using ‘men’ as a socially constructed identity group and as ‘shorthand’ for specifically both ‘individuals who identify as men’ and ‘individuals who present as men’. We recognize the continuum of gender identity. We also recognize that all men are not in the same advantaged position and possess the attending power. Finally, for this article, we are talking primarily about men who present as white. Men of color may not be (and often are not) in the same advantaged position in organizations. This disadvantaged position may also result from the intersectionality of other social identities, such as socio-economic status, education, and age.

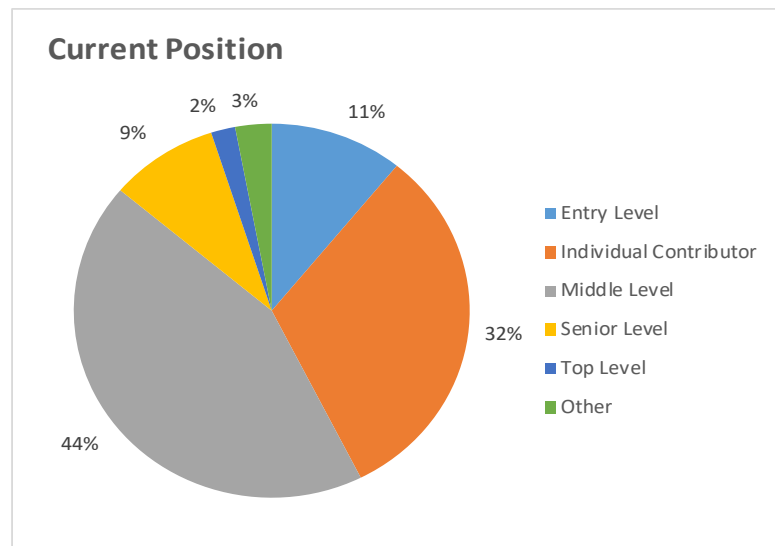
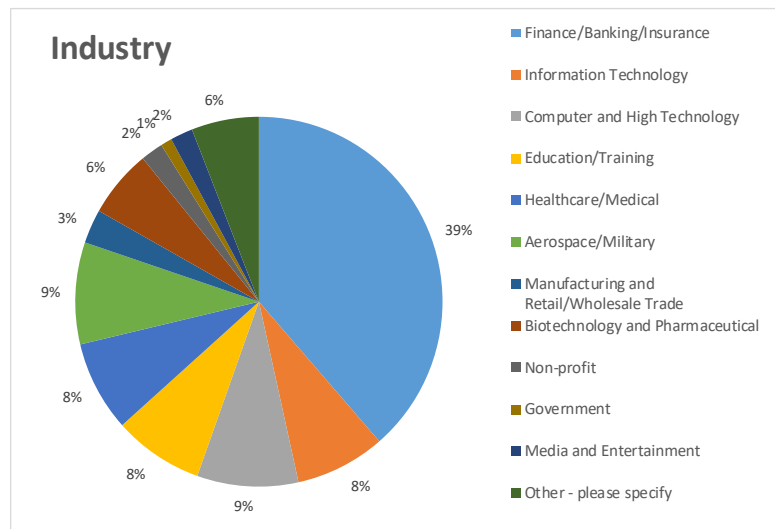
2. We have developed and are continuing to refine a more deeply nuanced definition of the actions that men allies take that will appear in future publications. This definition recognizes that there are two separate functions that are part of the role of men allies: 1. Clearing the path for individual women to succeed and 2. changing organizational structures to allow all women to succeed.

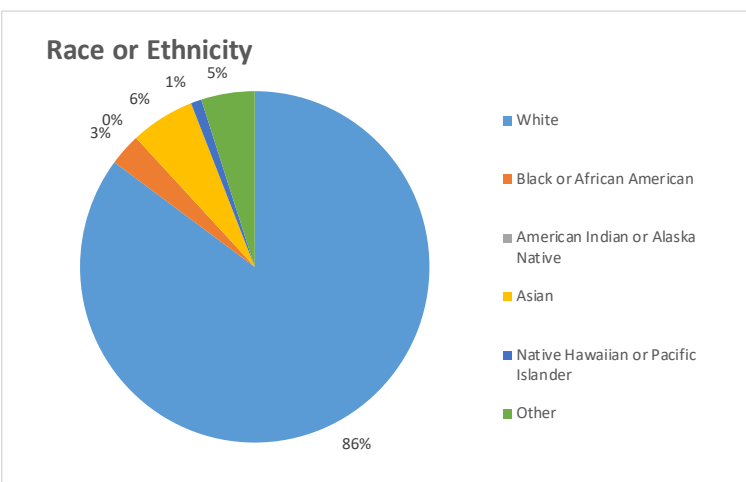
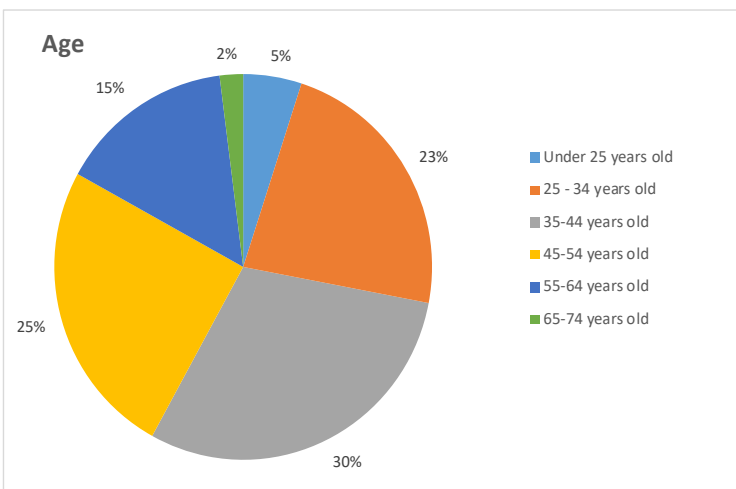
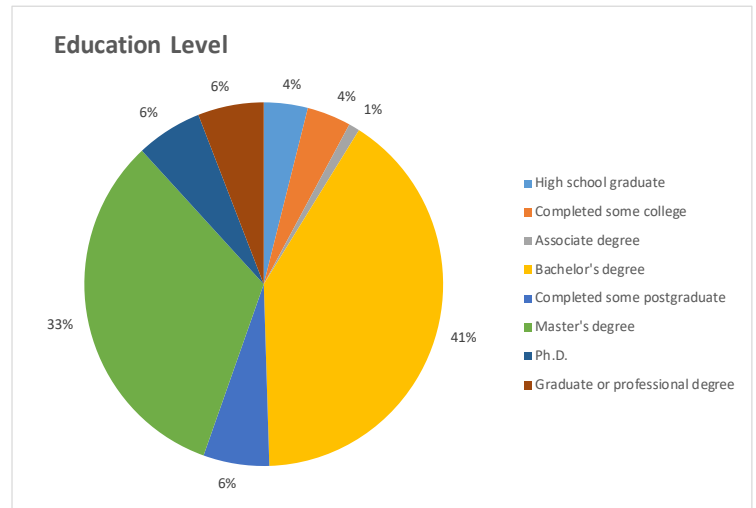
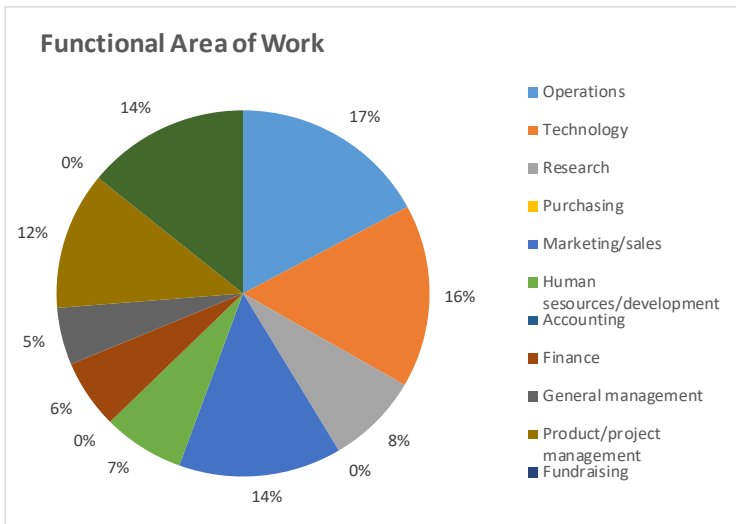
Allies have been defined as dominant group members who work to end prejudice in their personal and professional lives, and relinquish social privileges conferred by their group status through their support of nondominant groups.

3. In this research we considered the distinction between concrete actions and emotional support. Typical usage of the term “male allies” de-emphasizes the importance of social support; for this research we define men allyship as including both dimensions.

4. We also collected information on the participants’ perceptions of what organizations and individuals can do to develop and promote gender equity. Demographic data was collected. The survey included 26 questions, some of which were

open-ended, e.g. “What actions (if any) have men taken to support your career?” Other questions involved a forced choice. The survey was distributed via an app that participants downloaded to their phones; one hundred and sixty-two women responded in the US and forty in Dublin. The surveys in the two conferences were identical except for the addition of “none of the above” as an option in one of the questions in Dublin. Here are the demographics for the combined survey population.





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