



Men's Stories of Interrupting Sexism

The role of an ally is to know when to speak up.

—Senior manager in financial services

Dismantling sexism in the workplace cannot be done without men's vocal support and active engagement. As advocates, leaders, or role models, men play a crucial role in pressing for larger cultural shifts, policy changes, and other strategic gender initiatives.

One of the most visible ways they can fulfill this role is through interrupting the day-to-day sexism that is still all too common.

It may seem that interrupting sexism is simple: just equip men with a few techniques on how to manage uncomfortable encounters, and they'll know what to do. Or, just encourage speaking up, and then the sexist behaviour will stop. But challenging sexism is seldom straightforward. In the hypothetical examples below, for example, a man may wish to take action yet feel thwarted:

- What if the woman who was just interrupted by a man with a condescending tone doesn't want a second man to step in on her behalf?
- What if an associate who wants to tell his coworkers to speak more respectfully about the women on their team is gay, already feels like he doesn't belong, and is worried about being demeaned next?
- What if one man's attempts to promote gender advocacy in his organization creates a sense of resentment and backlash among other men?
- What if a division's senior managers have frequent all-men golf outings, and their employees are afraid to speak up for fear of being penalized for spoiling the fun?

None of these situations is unusual. And according to Catalyst's [report](#) from its [Interrupting Sexism at Work](#) series, fewer than 50% of surveyed men reported high likelihoods of responding directly to a sexist event. They are much more likely to respond indirectly—such as by redirecting the conversation or reacting unassertively—while 20% reported a high likelihood of doing nothing at all.

Whether or not men interrupt sexism goes far beyond their personal commitment and confidence. Organizational climate is extremely important. In fact, 41% of the decision by men to remain silent and do nothing to interrupt a sexist event in their workplace is explained by negative organizational climates.



This report features stories and insights of men committed to gender advocacy—in their own words—culled from 27 in-depth interviews with individual contributors, middle managers, and executives. (For more information on who we interviewed, see the methodology section at the end of the report.) These interviews provide first-hand accounts of their experiences and the reflection that followed, with all the nuance, complexity, and in-the-moment decisions that are part of the real-life workplace.

We recognize that individual men experience different levels of power and privilege. Race, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and other categories of identity privilege some men over others, and these differences impact men's experiences and understandings of interrupting sexism. What we offer in this report is a compilation of our interviewees' most telling commentary. Each account reflects the unique experiences and views of an individual. Yet collectively, these stories offer a mosaic of the kinds of situations, experiences, and deliberations that have shaped the professionals featured here and taught them lessons worth sharing. These visceral stories provide the context managers need to hone their inclusion efforts to resonate with as many employees as possible.

The stories below are organized thematically, followed by three in-depth "spotlight" stories that delve more deeply into particular strategies and methods for interrupting sexism.

FEELING EXCLUDED FROM THE CONVERSATION

I think there's huge value in not pushing men away. Because that feeling of missing out, there's emotion behind that and we need to kind of explore it...It's important to not alienate people.
—Individual contributor in energy

Today more than ever before, diversity and inclusion are an integral part of organizational strategy. Executives around the globe are examining their workforce data and finding innovative ways to build workplaces where talented women can thrive. To achieve this goal, all employees must be on board—and that includes men. Yet too often, men can feel left out and unsure of how they fit into gender initiatives—instead of galvanized to create more inclusive workplaces.

Men in our interviews highlighted the need for leaders and organizations to account for these feelings in initiative messaging and strategies.

Liam (all names have been changed for anonymity), a senior leader in retail fuel, points to how, in the absence of education and awareness, frustration and anger can set in.

[To promote a culture in which sexism is confronted safely and consistently] you have to involve everybody.

...Maybe it's media doing a bad job of it. But they [bring] awareness to a real concern within society and then...it gets overshadowed by, "Hey, why is it all about them all of a sudden...?" And it becomes..."We've got this Women's Council so everything's going to be for women now, right?...We're going to hire more women, we're going to promote more women."...**We run into the danger of not taking the opportunity to educate but [instead creating] more frustration and anger...[But if] you take the right steps through communication, through engagement and involvement of the greater workforce—you're changing beliefs of individuals.**



Kyle, a senior leader in energy, was surprised by the level of resistance that came from a group of men in his organization and tried to learn from it.

I participated in [an event] on the impact of straight White able-bodied men as allies in the diversity conversation. And so we scheduled that and we communicated across the organization that, “Hey participant, the HR director is participating in this webinar, here’s how you go and listen to it if you want to.”

Well, **it was met with the extremes of reaction.** So there was actually a group of men working in one of the field-based operations who objected very strenuously to [the company] promoting this webinar of men as allies in the diversity conversation.

There was actually a petition, there was actually a respectful workplace complaint because... a bunch of men objected to having this label. So I was quite surprised by that. And a learning for me was...we’ve got lots of field-based employees who are not open and are not ready for this conversation. **And as that process unfolded...I ended up communicating that I was glad that the complaint came forward because it gave us an opportunity to talk about the issue and try to meet these individuals where they are.**

But what you find is these are deeply ingrained beliefs. So in this particular instance it was a group of [20 men with] very old-school views. If they had a woman working on their team, they would likely not respond well to that.

And so that’s just sort of an example of—**we have certainly pockets of our culture that are still very resistant, that they’re going to put walls up. And I think our challenge in moving the work forward is you can’t just wait for society to make all of the changes. But the changes are coming.** They’re happening. And how do we get ahead of them knowing that our organization is made up of a very diverse group and lots of those people would say that this is a conversation that doesn’t belong in the workplace. This is a conversation that I find threatening. I’m offended by it, and I’m going to react negatively to it.

Even men who don’t feel such resentment might be unclear about how they fit into gender initiatives and broader discussions around gender equity in the workplace. Thomas, a senior leader in professional services, reflects on the need for an emotionally safe environment for men to ask tough questions.

I’ve talked about the need to include men in the discussion—too often they are excluded.... And when I speak up and talk about the need to have a really good open discussion that [is] safe for men to have, I will have men come up and say, “Thank you for saying that; I didn’t know how to say it.”

...I think **we need to create a safe environment for men to ask the questions that are on their mind around how they are to behave.** Because men [don’t] always know. They’ll pretend they do, and they’ll try their best. But I think we need safe environments for men to express themselves so that they are more comfortable creating a nonsexist environment.



POWER OF ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE

I would say the biggest difficulty is [men are] hesitant [for fear] they'll be marginalized by sticking their necks out. So it's sort of like if you're not going with the norm, if you stick your neck out, will you be isolated as well with the person that you're defending or that you're trying to help?

–Middle manager in energy

All too often, the quest to reduce gender bias at organizations rests on the shoulders of the people impacted by it and those who have the courage and conviction to interrupt sexist incidents.

Yet an individual man's personal commitment and investment can only go so far if he works at an organization that is not actively supporting his efforts. For example:

- What if the organization—even if unintentionally—has an environment where people who “stick their necks out” fear reprisal?
- What if stepping out and saying, however tactfully, “That was a sexist action” means being considered a poor fit for a certain team or being passed over for an important assignment?
- What if the senior managers on the team are “guys’ guys” who vocally compete over sales numbers, golf handicaps, and working hours, and they have the power to exclude someone who doesn't fit this profile?

Organizational climate can have a powerful impact on employees' decision-making, as these reflections illustrate:

Kyle, a senior leader in energy, comments that he can't speak up every time—he has to choose his battles carefully because there is risk involved in each conversation.

I feel very safe [speaking up against instances of sexism] with my own team, and maybe that's position power. I feel less safe when I'm dealing with...senior levels of the organization. There is a line that needs to be walked...it is going to be a risky conversation for me to say to a male senior vice president that there's microaggressions emanating from him about the woman who sits across the table.

So I wouldn't say I wouldn't do it...but it feels risky. And so **I have to measure those conversations because I also know that my ability to influence is always fragile. It's dependent on making sure I maintain those good relationships.**

[So] sometimes you have to pick your spots...if I speak too often and too openly about the inequities I see being perpetuated, then there's a tendency for some leaders [and] even peers to say, “Oh, well there goes the D&I guy again...we just have to listen to this, and then we can move on with business.”

...I think [promoting gender equity at work] takes courage because the voices are not that plentiful yet. And so you have to put yourself on the line a little bit and be prepared to handle some of the pushback....

I've had people that I have had good relationships and they kind of view me a little negatively now....So it takes courage, you might negatively impact some relationships. But...there's a lot more to gain.



Levi, a mid-level leader in heavy equipment sales, has experienced first-hand the effects of a silencing culture, and calls out the fear that that sort of culture can instill in men who might want to speak up.

[One of the] big factors that will silence someone indefinitely from allyship [is when] they're not able to speak up because they fear that they're not going to be able to progress... [But, in my experience], by not [caring] about those norms, I think you're better off. People kind of get caught off-guard and they're like, "Whoa, did you just speak up and say something to that... senior leader?" And then the answer is..."I did because it was the right thing to do."

[At my previous job, I spoke up and then] I lost my seat at the boys' club. That was the last time I was invited to another event, or working trip where we actually did go and do site visits. And I eventually did end up leaving the organization.

He also describes the thoughts that run through his head as he decides whether or not to speak up.

There's a lot of...factors that would weigh on my personal decision to intervene....Am I looking out for myself first, or am I putting that aside completely and just saying...it's worth the risk of potentially losing my job for speaking up, or being...shunned by a cohort of leaders?...Those are the big factors that will silence someone indefinitely from allyship.

Gabriel, a middle manager in energy, agrees.

I think the biggest thing that people fear is job security and whether they're appearing to be too liberal or too annoying or trying to be too righteous, if you will, by sticking our neck out and standing up for other people.

Eugene, a senior leader in food manufacturing, notes that most workplaces don't have anonymous systems to report sexist behaviour.

[The ability to safely] report on incidences of sexism would be helpful.... [Let's say] you overheard a manager say he doesn't want to hire somebody because she's a 28-year-old woman and [he's] worried she's going to be on maternity leave two out of the next five years...if you heard something like that...is there a safe way to communicate that without...putting your own career at risk?

Jay, a senior manager in financial services, points out that there are many fears men may have as they consider whether to interrupt sexism.

[That voice in your head that] tells you to ignore it, to move on, [that] it's easier just to get past this, let them finish what they're doing and then keep moving on....That I think comes from fear. Whether it's fear of embarrassment...fear of ostracization, fear of disrupting the status quo, fear of conflict, fear of not having the right words.

... I imagine there's probably a portion of the population that [doesn't say] anything in a situation where there's sexism [because of] a belief that that behaviour's okay. But...I want to believe that for most people those situations...[it's about the fact that] you're afraid of leading into it.



Brad, a mid-level leader in energy, identified a sense of futility as a reason some men may not speak up.

I saw some decisions being made, and I just thought, well, maybe things could have been done a little bit differently...but I didn't speak up because I didn't...feel like I was in a position...to ask that supervisor to validate his decisions. **I also didn't feel that I was empowered to maybe drive a different course of action [and] that [this] basically would have been a "this is what we're doing and just do what you're told" type of thing.**

Philip, a senior leader in consulting, points to organizational norms enforced by leaders that allow sexism to thrive.

A lot of that unconscious stuff is just that, right? It's not necessarily intentional, it is part of those cultural norms....And all too often what happens is the person who is experiencing [this]...feel[s] it but [doesn't] articulate it....**Quite frankly I think...those...small cuts [are]...the bigger challenge than...the really conscious [and] directed sexism....**I think the cultures where that thrives...is where...there's not clear mandates at the top.

I think there are other pieces, when an organization values results more than the "how," you'll see those bad behaviours forgiven, looked the other way, etc....which then allows [them] to continue, potentially multiply, potentially get worse.

And...also when an organization gets so fixated on success..."if someone's successful, we'll let them get away with this, well, they didn't really mean that." And there's a lot of excuses that can be attributed to that.

Edward, a senior manager in professional services, discusses how firms may actually encourage conformity through formal processes.

You just feel like it would be going on deaf ears, right. And if anything would be—I didn't feel safe raising those concerns to those individuals. There was an expectation that you toed the line, right, that you followed the mold.

One thing about professional services firms...if you go back [to] when I was starting my career, the up-or-out philosophy was very prevalent...So the idea is, you...hire a whole bunch of juniors, and those that make it you promote to the next level, and those that don't get promoted leave....**The expectation is you're moving up or you're moving out of the firm....What that does is it really creates, really reinforces, the conformity to this one culture, right? Because anybody that isn't conforming is leaving.**



STRATEGIES FOR INTERRUPTING SEXISM

No one wants to be told they're kind of a sexist, even though their behaviours might mean they are... Especially when it's nonintentional. So how do you navigate that in a way to end up in a positive place, as opposed to shutting people down, making them defensive?

–Senior leader in consulting

Not only does the act of interrupting have an impact on the person stepping in; it also impacts the person demonstrating the sexist behaviour. Will this person become defensive and resentful, or will they actually learn something from the experience? What type of intervention will be most effective in educating rather than alienating? So often, the best response to sexism depends on the severity of the situation, the people involved (how sensitive or defensive they are, and how educated they are about sexism), whether the intent was malicious, and the larger context.

Ryan, a senior leader in professional services, notes that understanding where a person is coming from both as an individual and as a part of workplace culture is important to a productive response.

[When deciding how to respond to workplace sexism,] I think intention is very important... Because we'll make mistakes, all of us...If it's a really bad mistake that's one thing, but if it's a [common] mistake...then it's really about...whether somebody can be educated in a way that they understand that their behaviours are sexist.

...We had one case where a woman complained about a sexist joke...We investigated it. I met with the person in question. And he didn't know. He became like this poster child of appropriate behaviour in the workplace after [that].

...We're human beings. And we have to make sure that [we're] not seen as...an institution where you step just a little bit offline and you're in big trouble. [We need to understand] how does that fit in the context of an organization? Is...our issue around culture? **Do we need to do broader cultural awareness things? Versus simply going after the individuals being the problem.** We need people to be open and honest and not clam up because they're afraid of discipline.

Ryan supports one-on-one conversations to share his perception of the interaction and understand what the other person is thinking.

You don't want to embarrass somebody in public....So if I observe a partner with sexist behaviour I would feel a responsibility to have a conversation with that partner in a nonpublic way. To say, these are my observations of what happened. And I'd like your reflection on that, and help me [understand] what you were thinking and doing when that happened.



For Jack, a middle manager in energy, private conversations can be an effective method of addressing sexist behaviour.

There are a couple of different ways [to interrupt sexism]. I think the most obvious is speaking up in the moment, when you hear something. But sometimes, depending on who's doing it and who's in the room and who you may think it might affect at the time...it's more effective to hold the person aside later and have that conversation privately.

Sometimes you don't want to be causing confrontation within a workplace environment or sometimes that person might...not [be] trying to be discriminatory. So sometimes having that one-on-one conversation of, "Hey, did you realize that when you said this, you're actually marginalizing this person," or "it can be considered discriminatory?"

And I think sometimes you can get more respect by having that one-on-one conversation versus calling someone out in front of a bunch of other people. So I think it really depends on the context.

Tyler, a senior leader in food manufacturing, agrees and describes how calling people out in a meeting can sometimes actually backfire.

Something more subtle might be more of a private conversation on the side after the fact, because...there's the old plausible deniability. "I know what you mean, you know what you mean, but if I call you on this right now, it's subtle enough that you have this plausible deniability." **And then it gets into somehow the accuser is the bad person versus the... person who did it.** In some ways...as a society it's...worse to call somebody sexist than it is to be sexist in some weird way.

[So] if it's not overt...there's deflections. Like, "That's not what I meant," or "I was joking".... And...**it gets flipped around [to]...the outrage of "I can't believe you would accuse me of that! I'm the least sexist person in the whole world,"** that type of response.

Sebastian, a senior leader in retail fuel, notes the complexity of various situations and outcomes.

Each [situation needs] to be handled a bit differently. It can be coaching to help them understand that though they may not have meant to harm anybody, that it does potentially... cause disruption and make people feel targeted or feel insecure in the workplace....And look for sincere remorse, look for clear understanding.

...And really...it's ambiguous, right? Like it's up to the individual and how they perceived what was done, why it was done, how it was done, and if people are like-minded, they might look at it and say, "Oh, it was just a joke. And hey, don't say that joke in public again." And, "Next time you want to do that, come into my office and tell me."

Versus taking a different approach to say, "Hey, there's really no place for that in the workplace. So don't." And if it was extremely severe, involvement of human resources.



Luca, a senior manager in professional services, considers what a target of sexism might want before taking action.

If I see sexism between two others, **do I go to the man and say, "Look, that was inappropriate"? Or is that going to be seen by the woman as like, it's almost a sexist thing to do. [Because] it implies she's not able to have that conversation as well, right?** So being the white knight sort of thing....

[What] would help me would be being able to better identify those situations that may be sexist that aren't as overt. And then secondly, what is the right intervention? Is it automatically... confronting the individual? Or should the first step always be going to the woman to ask...was this something [for which] she wants somebody else intervening on her behalf?

He also points out that a person's reaction to being called out can inform the follow-up response.

[The incident] may [reveal] unconscious bias, and the best way to kind of call that out...is to first [ask], "How did you feel [she perceived] what you said or did?"...

If it's..."Oh gee, I never thought of that," well hopefully they just had a learning moment...where they've revealed an unconscious bias. If it was a "Yeah, well, you know, she's just a woman," kind of a response, well then now you can deal with that very differently. You have a much stronger conversation.

Jay, a senior manager in financial services, states that it's important to have empathy for people to better understand them and approach them in an effective way.

I try to start from a lens of empathy. The one thing that I try to do is put myself into the other person's shoes. And whether it's the protagonist or the antagonist, I try to consider their perspectives....Assuming it's not malicious I try to create a teachable moment out of it. And not make it punitive. [Because] I think when you approach these types of situations and you make them punitive is when you get people shutting down. And they will get defensive and they back away. So I think for me **it's about being direct, but being direct with care.** And helping to create the understanding of why the behaviour that they were exhibiting could be holding other people back.

Kyle, a senior leader in energy, agrees that empathy is key, as is finding allies.

I think of my own background where I started becoming interested in this and just started doing a lot of reading and listening to a lot of stories.

...At one point a female colleague of mine said, "Look, you're the benefactor of unearned privilege." And I remember being offended by that...and saying..."Hey, I've worked hard, I've earned everything that I've got." And she said, "Yes, but you started fifty yards ahead in the race."



...At the end of the day you want to effect...change, and for the most part people who are taking acts of sexism...don't know any better. They're not trying to do harm. They don't understand.

So the opportunity is to say, "Hey, put yourself in that woman's shoes."...And I can reflect on circumstances where I've been treated differently, for example because I'm an introvert....And so, "You didn't say anything in that meeting, you must not have been paying attention." Or, "You must not be following and understanding the conversation."

Well, no, it's that I'm processing the information and I'm consolidating it, and I'll speak when I feel comfortable. **So I think everyone can find areas where they've been prejudged and on the negative end of a microaggression....The challenge is these conversations take time. And you can't just go from point A to point B in a day.**

...What we're trying to focus on is...build[ing] our little list of allies. Who are all the people in the organization that we know? And what we do is we feed those people lots of information. And we try to empower them wherever they are. But also...protect them against...the negative backlash that you might get....For us, this is a very promising sort of approach. It's about having a consolidated allyship strategy.

We know the people are out there who see the inequities and they want to effect change. They just don't know how. And so we think that we can really start to change the culture by knowing who those people are, connecting with them, and empowering them.

SPOTLIGHT STORY: MEETING MEN WHERE THEY ARE

Devin is a junior employee in energy transmission and has a from-the-ranks perspective on daily life at his organization. In his interview, he shared valuable advice on how to engage men as advocates for gender equity—even those who may initially view inclusion efforts with distrust.

Through first-hand experience, Devin has learned the importance of listening thoughtfully to men when they express doubts about the benefits of feminism.

I had a candid conversation...on International Women's Day. I was wearing a [company] feminist shirt..."I heart feminism" kind of campaign....I was volunteering at one of the events downstairs, and a guy came up to me...[and] said, "You've got to be careful wearing something like that here."

And I said, "Hang on, let's go get a room and talk about this." I wanted to...understand better what he was talking about. He's like..."**You're going to drive people away from you if they think that you support things like this.**"

And so...I...decided..."Okay, this is an opportunity for education. But...**I need to be very careful about my tone and...my attitude**" because inside I felt my chest tightening, and I was like, "Oh, God, this is going to be a difficult conversation to have."

But it ended up being about a...three-hour conversation... and I kind of started...trying to make sense of...where he came from. And [as] he opened [up], he explained to me that his dad was very hard on him, and they had a rough relationship, and he used to beat him and all those things. And I kind of said, "Yeah, I have the same kind of background, I understand where you're coming from," and **so we kind of built that initial connection.**

...Then I started to ask..."Tell me about your family."...He believed that women still need to be handling the children and men should be handling the work. And I wanted to kind of bring him onto my side to understand what feminism means to me... [which] kind of goes onto the parental leave policy that...you and your partner should decide what works best for you depending on your situation and your kids. So for you, for example, family and kids are your number one priority. You should have the ability to take as much time off as possible, and your partner should be able to get the benefit of being able to stay at work. And the same kind of flip-flop. It's not about...enforcing gender roles. It's you having the flexibility to fit what works best for you."

And I...asked, "Is this something that you would agree with?" He's like, "Yeah, absolutely, that puts more power in my hands."...And **he started to realize that the arguments that this side is making [are] the same things...he values.**

I think he had a preconception of the old school of feminism of like kind of...the "down with men" kind of perspective. And so I kind of explained I understand...**this environment [is] conservative... but...I invite anybody who feels that way to sit down and have a conversation with me because I guarantee, by the end of this conversation, you'll realize that we have very similar values.**

And by the end of that meeting, he was actually almost ready to start volunteering....

[A lot of men] always feel like...all of these initiatives [and events] are for women...[and] where's the Men Appreciation Day? Or where's the Men Thing?...**I've tried to explain to other people that feel as though they're missing out that I think there's huge value in not pushing men away. Because that feeling of missing out, there's emotion behind that and we need to... explore it and not be like, "Oh, you've had your time, we're having ours." It's important to not alienate people.**

Devin has also learned to take the time he needs to process his own emotions so that he can deliver his message most effectively when responding to incidences of sexism.

For me, **I'm focused more on the impact rather than the intention. So when I...feel my body tensing up in a certain way, I'll usually kind of take a break for a little bit and then come back to it.** And sometimes...I'll write an email to somebody and maybe erase it. I won't even send it, I'll write an email just to get it out of my head and then erase it, so I can kind of calm myself and then re-approach it later...**Because I think doing it in the heat of the moment is a little bit—like it doesn't land as well as doing it after the fact and being a little bit more thoughtful about the delivery.**

In Devin's view, when advocating for gender equity, men must be willing to dedicate plenty of time to convincing others of the benefits of an inclusive workplace because changing another person's worldview doesn't happen overnight. They need to be patient, and—just as important—willing to make themselves vulnerable, so that others feel comfortable being vulnerable as well.

And it takes a lot of energy from an ally's perspective because you have to match the person where they are, and then slowly pace with them and slowly lead them in the direction to realize that their values are actually the shared values...You have to set the energy aside to have that conversation, and it usually ends up being a one-on-one conversation away from their friends...where you can kind of go deep with someone and figure out what's the core values in terms of what they like, in terms of respect and family and that kind of thing. And then kind of tie that into...gender parity...in the workplace, and how that can help them and their family.

...I think to make these kinds of changes, you have to be...a lot less efficient when it comes to these conversations....Sometimes it takes time to build and...refine the message...it takes time to make that slow change....

I think it's much easier to support something when you respect the person that's kind of peddling it. And for me, I've had tons of guys come up to me and want to get involved in some of the crazy events that I get involved in...What makes it hard to create allies out of kind of thin air is **I have to be actively vulnerable about things that most men [aren't] vulnerable about.**

So I'll talk about mental health, I'll talk about family...I'll put pictures of my family on my desk and all these things; and actively go out of my way to make people feel comfortable to go deep with me and feel vulnerable with me. But...that's a commitment I have to make to create that space.

SPOTLIGHT STORY: TAKING AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH

John works in middle management and, as a gay man, he teaches us how intersectionality—our interconnected identities, such as gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, or religion, that shape our experiences of privilege and oppression within social systems of power—can affect the way we choose to interrupt sexism. He also explores the important role organizations play in teaching ways to confront sexism without creating what he calls a “high-crime moment.”

When he considers how to respond to a sexist event, John is acutely aware of what he calls his “social capital.” Will he have less clout as an advocate for inclusion if he gets a reputation as a person who is always calling out others? And does a man’s personal background impact his credibility as an advocate for gender equity? John’s candid exploration of these and other topics demonstrates how complex the decision-making process can be for employees who want to promote gender equity.

I also am very, very, very cognizant of something that I refer to...as my social capital....And I do believe that if an office like mine is...critiquing every single thing that happens that may not be in alignment with equity, diversity, and inclusion...you just become that sort of bleating goat that has the same response to everything all the time....**I am personally keenly aware of my bank account with everyone I’m dealing with. And I have to decide sometimes...do I cash in on this today, or do I keep that account full for another incidence?**...I think part of it...is the fear that if I’m only ever...a problem identifier, will I be brought in as a problem solver?

When asked what in his view could make it difficult for men to interrupt moments of sexism, he mentioned:

I think [men’s] own intersectionality [can also make it difficult to promote gender equity]...[and] White straight men tend to be in a better position...to be advocates because...they don’t have those other biases and perceptions of them laid on top of that.

I do think that...how [men] are...champions is...sometimes connected to their personal lives too....So the CEO with three daughters can stand up and give his “three daughters” speech every time that comes up....Sometimes their own families or their own world or their own personal lives either increase or decrease their credibility to speak about [this]. I don’t love that, but I think it’s true.

John has learned from experience how negative workplace atmospheres can stifle men who might otherwise be willing to step forward in support of their female peers.

I always think that one of my unique experiences as a gay male who didn’t come out until my late twenties was that I lived amongst straight men as one of them for a very long time. And I know damn well what they say...when they don’t think...women are in the room....**I...believe that people don’t move and react on these [comments] because they will be seen as...being traitors to the cause.**

...You know I am a male, but I am not the stereotypical male, I'm a gay male. And therefore I am already in some environments having to prove my credibility, having to be part of the club as it were. And so I think...I'm not even heard at the same level by that sort of core group of men because I'm not one of them.

...We're really stuck in [this industry] on this idea of merit....And I think one of the barriers is that **there's a sense that inclusivity is the lowering of standards**, as if all [men] has ever had merit. But there's this idea I think that...if you're a champion for reducing sexism in the workplace what you're actually a champion for is reducing the quality of our work environment, the quality of our outputs. And that you're going to leave "well-qualified men" at the curb because of some social engineering.

John is candid in describing the challenges of calling out a sexist incident, especially when he isn't sure that an intervention will be welcome.

I'll be frank. In the moment I did not challenge [a sexist incident]. Those people were also senior to me and the meeting was actually very tense to start with....Immediately after the meeting had ended, and the two men had left I reached out to the woman...to say, "If you were feeling a certain way, I certainly saw the same."...I [was] also careful because the person I was talking to is so bright and so esteemed and so professional, I didn't necessarily want to step in on her behalf...I didn't want to take away her voice and her agency.

John believes that organizations play a critical role in helping employees develop what he calls "fluency": a framework for having difficult conversations that would help employees educate one another about sexism without causing an immediate negative reaction.

There's very few things one can say in a professional environment that carry as much weight as saying to someone "I believe that you are racist" or "That behaviour had racist motivation," right?...If I say "you're acting...racist,"...a person might be like, "Who the F... are you and why would you say that?"

I really want to promote the idea of fluency where I can say to you, "I think that statement was couched in racist bias, and by the way, I have racial bias, too. But can we just talk about this?"

...We need a fluency that if I say to you, "I think you were just acting in a sexist way,"...[that doesn't need] to be a high-crime moment....

It should be a chance for us to have a conversation. But as soon as you say "sexism," "racism," [...] what you think I've just told you is, "You're a bad person."...The person isn't saying that, but that's how it's...interpreted.

So I constantly advocate for this fluency where if someone comes to me and says, "I think that you just acted on racial bias," that I would say, "Thank you for that, please tell me more." I am telling you after 16 years in this work, I have never heard that. So it's that fluency piece as well.

SPOTLIGHT STORY: RETHINKING ALLYSHIP

A senior leader at a nonprofit, Alex shares thoughtful ideas about the meaning of allyship. He questions what we really mean when we use the word “ally,” and reminds us that men will be more motivated to become allies if they truly understand that they won’t only be supporting women—they’ll be improving their own lives as well.

I struggle with the term “allies.” I think it’s a very big buzzword right now, but to be an ally, you have to have more power than someone, and we actually stop short of those conversations about reconstructing power, sharing power, losing power to empower others.

...Feminism over the last 70-plus years had a really great conversation about women’s roles and identities and society, and we’ve been missing that parallel conversation for, with, and about men. And...the social media culture...has positioned feminism as some sort of antidote to masculinity, which it’s not. **Feminism is the antidote to patriarchy, but we haven’t gotten men to understand that patriarchy harms them as well.** And so for us, it’s not just necessarily allyship....**The fundamental human question from our perspective is “what’s in it for me?”... And if we only position “allyship” or feminism as [for] the benefit of women and girls, then it’s not necessarily authentic.** But if we say, “you need to tackle patriarchy because three out of four suicides are men. Men die on average five years earlier than women. Men are the primary perpetrators of violence against women, children, other men, and themselves. And men experience increased rates of incarceration, addiction, homelessness, social isolation.” There’s a whole laundry list of issues that men are facing. So if we can position the conversation about overcoming patriarchy to do that, and men then have a vested interest in overcoming that... women and girls [also] benefit from it.

Alex also reminds us that when we talk about “parity” between men and women, we should think about areas where men are underrepresented as well. When will it become socially acceptable for men to dedicate themselves to fields that have traditionally been dominated by women?

I struggle with parity because if we push 50-50 in one sector, we also have to push 50-50 in another sector, and I don’t see people doing the work of getting more men into nursing, caregiving, early childhood education....Until we start doing that work, we’re really creating kind of a zero-sum game where men are losing out.

There’s lots of men who believe in gender equity...but let’s say you have a four-year-old boy, and he comes up in his favorite pink T-shirt and says, “I’m going to wear this to school today.” You might be in conflict, you might say, “I want my son to be happy and to do that, but I also want to protect him.”

And so many men or even lots of women [uphold patriarchy]...to be honest, women uphold patriarchy as much, if not more than, men sometimes. [They] would...protect their son from that backlash and not allow them to do it. Which then just perpetuates the problem....**We do a great job of telling our daughters they can do anything boys can do, but we do a [poor] job of telling our sons that they can do anything girls can do. And until we do that, we’re not going to have gender equity.**

Alex believes that men need to be encouraged to face their fears of what they might lose by standing up for gender equity—and recognize that they have more to gain.

I think a lot of it is that we overvalue what it is we might lose. We undervalue what it is we might gain. **So we overvalue the status, the ability to be invited out for beers with the boys.** The ability to say what we want without consequences of thinking of how that impacts others.

I think a lot of the language and the way that we think about this is maintaining power over others. And so that's a big piece of it, I think.

And we undervalue our mental health. We undervalue the quality and depth of our relationships with others. We undervalue that we have an identity beyond just being a primary breadwinner or a leader or a high-end income earner. All those kinds of things.

According to Alex, for an organization to truly become more inclusive, it must not only support its employees with tools and training, but also create a sense of safety so that they can interrupt sexism without fear of repercussions.

Nowadays, stakeholders and shareholders go to leaders and say, "Diversity and inclusion [are] important. Go forth and do it." But if you've never lived your life that way, where do you begin? There's no MBA course on this. There's no weekend seminar. It's a culture shift. And people are not getting the support to go through that culture shift.

And I look at it as a pair of glasses. It's a new way to see the world. And we're not equipping [employees] with those tools. So then we're shocked that they don't have success. We're not tying their income and performance measures to it.

...I believe there's three levels of change—individual, community, and systemic. And there might be an individual who...is working on themselves and their identity as a male...[with their partner]. But then they go to work, and workplace is a male-dominated [and] potentially toxic culture, and it's difficult to translate those things into that...organizational change, let alone any sort of systemic change....

[Employees need to feel] safety in the sense of psychological safety, positional safety. Even just the other week someone shared with me that [he was] invited by senior leadership...to go golfing and [other] colleagues weren't invited, and he said something about it and then faced the consequences of never being invited again and [his] advancement within that organization being stunted....So I think that allies or potential allies are making those types of calculations as well.

Alex leaves us with some sound advice on how to most effectively interrupt sexism:

It feels good to put someone in their place and let them know [what they did] was wrong. But in the long-term, it might be more harmful than helpful.

...I think it's really...important to normalize that it's not always easy. But to get people feeling empowered that there's a lot of different things they can do.

I mean we're socialized to be the knight in shining armor. And if we fail at that, then we feel like we can't do anything. So there's some internal programming to overcome.

[And] another consideration is how well do I know the person? If I know them more intimately, maybe there's an opportunity to have a personal conversation after the fact. If I don't know them, if I don't need to know them, maybe there's more of an opportunity to do it publicly in the moment. It's tough because there's a lot of stuff that goes [into] it. It triggers the "fight, flight, or freeze" [response] and sometimes you can't help the reaction, and then you've got to cope with how hard are you going to deal with it, maybe after the fact but not in the moment.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The words of our interviewees provide us with important insights into the real challenges of interrupting sexism from day to day. For additional information and guidance on organizational climate and interrupting sexism, Catalyst offers these materials:

Reports:

[Interrupting Sexism at Work: How Men Respond in a Climate of Silence](#)

[Interrupting Sexism at Work: What Drives Men to Respond Directly or Do Nothing?](#)

Infographics:

[Conversation Ground Rules](#)

[Flip the Script: Leading Inward](#)

[Flip the Script: Leading Outward](#)

[Lead Outward and Lead Inward to Build an Inclusive Workplace](#)

Knowledge Burst:

[Disrupting Sexism in the Workplace](#)

METHODOLOGY

Format: A trained facilitator conducted in-depth interviews with 27 men in the Canadian labour market who are involved in gender advocacy in their workplace, currently or in the past, or expressed personal interest in being part of the solution to address sexism at work. The interviewer relied on facilitation techniques to create a safe space for men to make their voices heard. Except for one face-to-face interview, the interviews were conducted via video conference.

Recruitment and Sample: We used snowballing sampling to recruit the participants. Those who worked in upper- and senior-level management positions represented 59% of the sample, with 33% mid-level managers and 4% in nonmanagerial positions. The average age of participants was 46 years old. Of the group, 74% identified as White, 7% South Asian, 4% Chinese, 4% Indigenous, and 11% as other racial or ethnic groups. Participants with fewer than six years of tenure at their current organizations comprised 33%, and 19% had more than 20 years of tenure. Interviewees came from diverse industries, with 37% from resources, utilities, and energy; 26% from healthcare, education, government, and nonprofit; and the rest from other industries such as business services and consulting, high-tech and telecom, finance and accounting, and manufacturing.

Interview Content: Our interview questions were purposefully designed to encourage participants to reflect on contextual factors in organizations that can have either enabling or disempowering implications for men's ability to actively interrupt sexism.

Interview topics included: (1) a discussion of participants' backgrounds and engagement in gender advocacy both inside and outside the workplace; (2) perceptions of workplace conditions that can promote sexism; (3) experiences with interrupting sexism and organizational factors impacting those experiences; and (4) suggestions for how organizations can encourage men to advocate for gender equity as well as ideas for effectively interrupting sexism.

Analysis of Interview Data: All the interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and were transcribed verbatim for analysis. Audio files were permanently deleted after transcription was completed. Any identifying information, including participants' real names and their current or previous workplaces, was removed from all the transcripts.

Two team members manually coded two of the interviews independently, wrote detailed memos, and then compared codes. A codebook was developed based on this initial coding and imported into NVivo, a qualitative data analytics software.

Three team members then coded the remaining interviews in NVivo and explored the major themes emerging from the data. The analysis provided an in-depth understanding of how managers and leaders perceive causes of sexism in the workplace, barriers to men's engagement in combating it, and organizations' role in alleviating those challenges.

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