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MESSENGERS MATTER: WHY ADVANCING GENDER EQUITY REQUIRES MALE ALLIES

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Making progress toward gender equity in political science requires the efforts of many, including those who have directly experienced inequity and those who have not felt its immediate

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impact. This *must* include both women *and* men in the discipline. Men, in fact, may have a unique role to play. Our research suggests that some men will avoid hearing messages from women advocating for gender equity. However, these same men are open to that message when it is delivered by a man. For this reason, one of the most important contributions that men can make to advance gender equity is to confront discrimination and champion messages about gender equity with other men. Although this strategy has limitations, we believe it has important practical benefits, especially in areas of the discipline in which women are few in number.

Allies are particularly important in the fight against sexism because many factors can make it difficult for targets of discrimination to directly address its effects. In some cases, gender discrimination can happen in rooms without women

present. Even when discrimination happens in clear view, its targets must contend with the fact that claims of discrimination often are met with doubt, denigration, and even retaliation (Czopp and Monteith 2003; Dodd et al. 2001; Fitzgerald, Swan, and Fischer 1995; Kaiser and Miller 2001; Rasinski and Czopp 2010). These dynamics provide not only a challenge for rooting out discrimination but also an opportunity for allies.

Research in social psychology and political science confirms that those who are not targets of discrimination often can be more successful when addressing it. In laboratory experiments, men who confront gender discrimination were more likely to change their behavior without facing backlash (Dodd et al. 2001). Similarly, Munger (2017) found that high-status whites were most successfully able to reduce racist expressions in online spaces. Both strains of research demonstrate that allies have an ability to confront inequity without facing negative social costs. Furthermore, this work suggests that to oppose prejudice, discrimination, and inequity, we must change social norms around these issues and practices.

Even in the absence of overt discrimination, men can be allies in the fight for gender equity. Our research used a choice-based experimental design that allowed respondents to either choose to listen to a woman's perspective on the #MeToo movement or to avoid that content (Testa et al. forthcoming). Among those who avoided the message, we used a second round of randomization to assess how those who avoided the message from a woman reacted to that same message when provided by a different woman or a man.¹ Our results suggest two potential reactions to these messages among the avoiders. When those who would prefer not to hear the message about #MeToo from a woman were forced to hear a message from a woman, there was a backlash effect. The message, when delivered by a woman, provoked a more negative response toward the movement, particularly among male respondents. When these respondents received the same message from a man, however, it made them

increasingly sympathetic to the movement (Testa et al. forthcoming). Essentially, people who otherwise would avoid listening to a message about sexual harassment or discrimination from a woman can be persuaded by that message if it is delivered by a man. Our results echo previous scholarship, affirming that for people most likely to avoid a woman's message about gender equity, the same message from a man leads to more openness to it.

Although our experiments relied on samples from the general population, we expect that similar trends hold true for political scientists. First, there are many documented incidences of discrimination and harassment in the discipline. As recent scholarship underscores, experiences of harassment and discrimination occur in our academic institutions (Brown 2019; Sulfaro and Gill 2019) as well as in disciplinary conferences

(McDermott 2019). Second, we still find evidence of these effects among those with more education, although those effects are slightly diminished.²

The implication of this research for political science is that men have an important role to play in advancing gender equity. Although changing the composition of networks and professional opportunities is key, the conversations that happen among men should not be overlooked as opportunities to make change and create new norms in the discipline. This means that men will need to listen to the experiences of women—but our work also emphasizes that men need to talk to other men. Often, discussions of gender occur when women are present, precisely *because* women are present. Men should push themselves to have these conversations in less diverse contexts as well. Given that many spaces are still male-dominated—as evidenced by gendered citation and coauthorship networks (Dion, Sumner, and Mitchell 2018; Teele and Thelen 2017)—men should consider how they can talk about gender equity even when women are not present. Contributing to norms that support victims of harassment and condemn retaliation may be especially important (McDermott 2019). Simultaneously, of course, the discipline should work to make progress so that those settings become fewer and farther between. Diversifying networks while simultaneously challenging gender inequity in homogeneous networks can powerfully reshape social norms, which often is a crucial component for overcoming patterns of mistrust and discrimination (Paluck and Chwe 2017).

We think this is an important piece of a broader strategy to challenge gender inequities; however, we also must acknowledge the limitations to interventions by allies. To achieve gender equity, it is essential that allies do not overpower the voices of those marginalized because of gender. Instead, they should work to dismantle barriers within the discipline while using their ability to communicate with those who do not view gender inequity as a problem or with those who cannot identify how they may contribute to inequalities within the discipline. Working to “speak up” but not to “speak for” is a difficult balancing act but might be strictly necessary in homogeneous spaces.

Finally, more work is needed on this important topic. Our research focused on gender-relevant messages between men and women, but the images of men and women shown to subjects in our experiment were white. We did this to hold other demographic differences constant. However, this choice means that we do not know whether men of a different race, socioeconomic status, or sexuality would be equally effective as messengers. It may be that men from marginalized groups face greater challenges when advocating for women because scholars from dominant groups may tend to interact with and be influenced by messengers who are “like them” (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). Examining these possibilities is important not only for addressing issues of gender inequity but also for addressing other equity issues in the discipline. ■

NOTES

1. This experiment was administered to two different samples: one convenience sample through Mechanical Turk (N=1,137) and one nationally representative sample through Qualtrics (N=1,000). Our dependent variables of interest measured support for the #MeToo Movement.

2. Those with a higher level of education are less likely to avoid a #MeToo message from a woman (in one of our two samples). Similarly, our results are somewhat stronger among those with less education. However, there still are persuasive effects even for those with a higher level of education.

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HOW MEN CAN “STAND UP” FOR WOMEN IN GROUP SETTINGS

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How can we use the impressive body of research on gender dynamics in group settings to make meaningful changes toward advancing gender equity in our discipline, on our campuses, and in other spheres of our lives? This article highlights key takeaways and practical strategies from empirical research in multiple disciplines.

First, why focus on group dynamics? Academic life consists of navigating a system of formal and informal networks and groups. This article focuses on how men can advance gender equity in group settings; however, it also is important to recognize the need for greater equity for people of color (men as well as women), non-Western scholars, LGBTQ scholars, and other underrepresented groups in the discipline. After all, although our discipline has seen the emergence of the #WomenAlsoKnowStuff movement, Weber (2015) noted that the inaugural International Studies Association