Allyship: Cooperation Is the Key to Success

With a multitude of reasons behind the lack of women in STEM, we must consider effective solutions to these problems, such as allyship. Allyship is a key productive approach to attacking the gender parity concerns in STEM. This involves men making themselves allies to their female counterparts. An extension of the definition provided above, allyship “is a place of unlearning and relearning, and is a life-long process of building relationships based on trust, consistency, and accountability” (“What Is Allyship?”). Furthermore, “our efforts must be recognized by the people we seek to ally ourselves with” (“What Is Allyship?”). As such, “a man is an ally when a woman says he is” (Shelton). One anecdotal reference explains the level of cooperative equity and mutual understanding required in allyship perfectly: “if you have come to help me you are wasting your time but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together” (“What Is Allyship?”). This quote also highlights the level of codependence needed to successfully achieve effective allyship. So what exactly does allyship entail? And how can we be allies?

Dr. Roger Green, associate professor at North Dakota State University, has founded the Advocates and Allies program. This program seeks men “to serve as change agents, committing to be active and vocal proponents of gender diversity and equity specifically in terms of increasing the [...] recruitment, retention, promotion, and sustainability of women faculty in engineering across a broader spectrum of academic institutions” (“About the Advocates and Allies Program”). Across the U.S. this program has been implemented across several universities, including the Rochester Institute of Technology. Their goals:

1. Educate faculty men about issues related to gender equity in academia
2. Introduce faculty men to strategies for bringing about positive change in their department and colleges
3. Build a supportive network of faculty men who are Advocates and Allies for all Faculty

(“Advance RIT- Advocates and Allies”).

The program divides members into two categories: advocates and allies, as per the name. Advocates are considered “senior men faculty who educate themselves about issues of gender [in]equality” and allies are “men faculty whom the Advocates train as proponents for gender equity in their departments” (“About the Advocates and Allies Program”). The Advocates and Allies Program organizes several workshops on subjects ranging anywhere from climate control in the classroom to the science of unconscious
bias ("NDSU Advance FORWARD Initiatives"). There are also resources provided to help institutions, students and faculty run their own allyship workshops. But before we can become allies, we must fully understand what it means to be an effective ally, why it is important, and why it works.

Since an ally is someone who acknowledges, openly discusses, and utilizes their privilege to benefit a marginalized person or group, they are required to partake in several actions that emulate their empathy. This includes broadening our understanding of struggles faced by women in STEM in addition to acting out of a place of responsibility rather than guilt. Additionally, allies should not “expect award or special recognition for confronting issues that people have to live with every day” ("What Is Allyship?").

“Allyship looks like white women in STEM advocating on behalf of racial minorities in STEM, just as much as it looks like men in STEM advocating on behalf of women in STEM. And it’s one of the biggest ways to make a difference in whichever communities you may be a part of. Oppressed groups should not be expected to fight for equality on their own, and we should be standing up and supporting them - not out of guilt or shame, but out of a recognition that diversity is strength, and leads to more innovation, creativity, and resourcefulness within STEM fields” (Lim).

Simply inviting women to join the conversation isn’t enough, we need to make them feel included in order to incite meaningful participation. Since men majorly hold the privileged positions of power, their willingness to recognize women’s barriers and make small corrections in their behaviours and actions is crucial to creating a more diverse and inclusive climate. This requires adjusting small microaggressions that may seem meaningless to a man but in fact heavily affect the overall success of women. For instance, unconsciously interrupting a woman when she is making a point during a meeting but attentively listening to a man. Until men recognize these behaviours within themselves and are willing to understand and grow from them, women will continually face micro-inequalities that contribute to the overarching gender gap. An example of the importance of an allyship between working men and women lies in Jim Turley, retired Chairman & CEO of Ernst & Young, who learned the importance of perspective early on (Turley). Working for a company at which he was a partner for in the 90s, Turley’s 23-year-old female colleague brought to his attention that all the corner and window offices at this firm were occupied by men (Turley). While a seemingly insignificant detail, this carries the underlying subordination of women in the workplace. It creates an environment that is unwelcoming to a group already struggling to get their foot in the door within the professional world. Seeing this woman’s perspective led Turley to build what turned into a key program for women, forming an allyship that assisted in eradicating such scenario.

So how exactly can we be effective allies to women in STEM? Professor Jo Handelsmen, from the University of Wisconsin, provides a prime example of an effective solution made possible through allyship. She founded a program “to pay for childcare for graduate students who wanted to participate” ("How Men Can Help, with Professor
Jonathan Eisen”). What makes this program so operative is that it looks at the defining reasons behind female underrepresentation in STEM and seeks solutions that address specific issues. It's not enough to just invite women to conferences, you need to consider the blockages they face that keep them from attending; in this case, the work-family issue. Being an ally “is more than just the big, occasional gestures. It’s about the everyday actions you demonstrate: calling out unhelpful behaviours, having awareness of subconscious bias and being a strong form of support for your female colleagues” (“Why Women Engineers Need Men... as Allies”). “As men occupy more senior roles and end up being the majority voice amongst the policy makers, we need men to support business policies that accommodate and promote women in the workplace” (“Why Women Engineers Need Men... as Allies”).

Allyship in the classroom is of particular importance to closing the gender gap in STEM. A study conducted at the University of Maine—one of the several academic institutions to implement the Advocates and Allies program—shows that female (undergraduate) students feel that STEM classes are exclusive of their gender. They want to see more information included about women scientists in course material (as textbooks often leave them out), more female scientists speaking at guest seminars, and a change in the faculty’s attitude toward women in STEM (“Perspectives from Women Undergraduate Students…”). This last point is of particular importance as a classroom’s culture is determined by the professor running it. As such, “faculty are the fulcrum of change in the research university. Their values and behavior permeate everything a university does and stands for, and therefore it is essential that all faculty consider their own impact on women in science. From the subtle to the blatant, faculty behaviors often shape women’s careers” (“Sex and Science: Tips for Faculty”). Isolating female students through a sexist classroom culture, whether intentionally or unintentionally, is a large contributor to the lack of females present in STEM.

This is detrimental to our global success as time-and-time again it has been proven that gender parity improves productivity. This is unsurprising as “many women bring unique perspectives to old problems, new interdisciplinary work to a field, and different styles of leadership to a department, and many women attract new students from diverse backgrounds just by their presence” (“Sex and Science: Tips for Faculty”). Furthermore, as Dr. Yontan Zunger (Chief Architect of Social at Google) states,

“whenever gender ratios move beyond a 3:1 ratio in either direction, people in the minority become a little bit more nervous, slightly more hesitant, and a lot more self-conscious about bringing up any issues; they start to censor themselves. This is futile because if someone is censoring themselves by not talking, they may as well not be in the room. This can be countered by actively drawing people out and making them join the conversation. Another observation Yonatan makes is how behaviors are influenced by gender ratios; if a group is mostly men, certain social behaviors tend to happen which are unproductive, and the same can be observed for a group that is mostly women, with different social behaviors.”
Many tech companies find that, “even when [they] attract more female technical workers, these women are less likely to stay and contribute if their male colleagues fail to collaborate with them” (Shelton). As such, it is key for women to seek male allies, not because they cannot succeed without them, but because they can assist in creating more supportive environments, sort through on-the-job challenges, look for opportunity, and navigate the trade-offs that every professional culture requires (Shelton). Engaging men as allies is then crucial to women’s success as even Michelle Obama, former First Lady of the United States, stated in a seminar I recently attended on achieving gender equity in our political-economic climate. She addressed how, in society’s current structures, men hold majority of leadership positions and as such hold a responsibility toward women to support their aspirations of obtaining the same leadership roles through equal opportunity and standards. Roger Green also discussed the importance of this mutually beneficial relationship that must exist between male and female working professionals. Further, over a brief phone interview I conducted, he highlighted the significance of men discussing allyship and gender inequity concerns with other men, exclusively. Green made sure to emphasize that because men are not women, they can never truly understand the struggles women face and thus, provide an outsider perspective that requires women’s validation in order to be deemed valuable. This is due to the fact that men have the privilege of escaping several workplace barriers that women face, and since “the greatest privilege of all is not knowing you have it”—meaning that most men have the luxury of leading their lives without having to concern themselves with gender inequity issues—it is men’s duty as allies to ensure that they keep gender differences in an empathetic light at the forefront of their minds; one of many aims the Advocates and Allies program seeks to achieve. Oddly enough, this allows us to understand the importance of men-only spaces as it provides a forum for mistakes and misunderstandings, in turn creating a level of comfort and support among male allies so that they may actively participate in reaching gender equality.

It is important to note that gender equality does not imply that differences amongst men and women do not exist. In fact, disregarding gender differences furthers issues of gender disparity. As such, to effectively provide solutions unique to women, we must understand and address their female-specific concerns by embracing gender differences. This includes valuing and integrating the different styles in which women work, learn, and think. However, naming something as valuable will hardly make it so. Doing so “ignores the power of the masculine image that underlies most generally accepted models of success and leadership” (“Making Change”). It is then the Advocates and Allies program’s vision to reshape work culture through several minor, but fundamental, changes that allows men and women to co-operate on an equal plane. Women do not need fixing, the system does; and we need everyone to help do it.

References


