Men’s Activism to End Violence Against Women

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Having looked at the routes into involvement, we now turn to the experiences of men once they are involved in men’s activism to end violence against women. We look at the ways in which men are supported to do this work – primarily through women feminist activists and practitioners – but also to a lesser extent from other men in a range of settings (as friends, as other men working to end violence against women). As well as considering the support and the positive aspects of involvement, it is also important to make visible and discuss the obstacles or struggles that men might face and any problems or limitations of men being involved in this work. Obstacles and struggles can be located in the personal, the professional and/or the political. Even though we at times try to separate these analytically in the book, these spaces, in reality, often overlap. Often, the interviewees described criticisms as coming from multiple directions, from women and women’s groups as well as from other men and men’s groups.

Women in the movement supporting men to be involved

Just as women emerged as very important in men becoming involved in this work, they were the primary support that men talked about as important to sustaining their involvement. Many of the men we interviewed talked about extremely influential relationships with women that they had longstanding friendships with. In the previous chapter we talked about how women as friends or family were very influential in becoming involved. This part of the chapter is about developing and sustaining that involvement; the focus shifts away from friends and family generally and towards women working in the feminist violence against women movement. These women tended to be described as people who ‘pushed’, encouraged or provided ‘friendly challenge’ to the men to develop their thinking and behaviour as male allies to the violence against women movement. In a number of cases the friends were lesbian women working in the movement. One of the Swedish participants highlighted the fact that some of the women who both supported and challenged him were lesbian, describing it
as ‘refreshing’ in both the tone and level of challenge they directed towards him:

I think also that they weren’t heterosexual, they were not interested in any way – I mean, there was not any type of that game going on. They were like, ‘Come on mate, this is bollocks’... they didn’t feel that they should be gratified by men, so they didn’t shun from being critical or even acidic at times. And that was kind of refreshing, you know. (Noah, Sweden)

As a man from a minoritised ethnic background in mainstream Swedish society which he regarded as deeply racist, he commented that it was refreshing to be criticised for something more ‘deserved’ than the racist attitudes he faced so often:

Some of my closest friends, and have been for almost 20 years now, happen to be, well, lesbians and feminists. And they would almost self-identify as ‘man-hating’. But for me it was like a welcome shift, that somebody – well, they didn’t hate me, but they would criticise me. Not because, ‘Oh, you, darkie, this is how we do it in this country, learn our ways and behave’. Instead, they said, ‘That’s so typically male of you’. If they criticized me like that, that felt loyal to me, that criticism, rather than an undeserved criticism. And I was like, ‘Okay, I get you, I relate, thanks’. (Noah, Sweden)

Men described a variety of ways in which they received support from women in the violence against women movement. Not surprisingly, this support often worked well when it was reciprocal in nature. One of the interviewees described the work that he did with women’s organisations in Northern Ireland:

Both when I was in practice, in terms of working with the local Women’s Aid group, with the families that we were working with and trying to access resources. Later on, in terms of working groups, in terms of developing strategies and policy. And as I moved into academia, in relation to, you know being prepared to co-teach, and also with research projects. And if there was an idea I had for research project and asked them if they would assist, or vice versa, if there was something they wanted to know about, and coming
and asking myself and colleagues if we would assist them with that. So there’s been really strong relationships with people in practice. (Christopher, UK)

As well as traditional friendships, online support from feminist activists on social media and online and face to face support from specialist women’s organisations was also important. In Spain, having supportive feminist journalists being willing to promote the work the men were doing was important, and this was particularly the case for left-wing media and publications. For example, journalist Nuria Coronado interviewed a series of men in the gender equality arena about their work. This support from activists and feminist professionals and practitioners was mentioned as a significant form of encouragement by participants in interviews across all three countries. Although, as we will also describe later in this chapter, there were also challenges and perceived limitations in terms of these relationships. This support is particularly visible when it comes to social media platforms, predominantly Twitter, where some of the men had their high ‘rock star status’ both echoed and accentuated within social media.

Interviewees also described private support received from a range of organisations. This was particularly mentioned in the Spanish and UK interviews:

Privately we received many recognitions from the Ministry or from women’s associations of every kind, encouraging us. (Jon, Spain)

When I wrote my first book [on violence against women], feminist women, who I was beginning to know then and who have become great friends now, they gave me enormous support. That a man wrote a book about these things that seemed good, they wondered, where did this guy come from? At that time it was not normal at all. (Pedro, Spain)

I went to Southall Black Sisters, I said ‘I’m not Black and I’m not one of the Sisters, but can you help?’ I told them my work skills. And they said, ‘forget all that crap Lee, what you will need more than anything is persistence’. (Lee, UK)

This is not to suggest that men were universally welcomed and supported with open arms into this work. For many, their relationships
with some women’s organisations were much more complicated and often built upon foundations of mistrust.

**Rocky relationships – tensions with women’s groups**

Feminist and profeminist scholars and activists have highlighted how there are a number of risks associated with men playing a greater role in efforts to end violence against women (for example, see Marchese, 2008; Pease, 2008; Macomber, 2018; Burrell, 2020). This is in particular due to the power and privileges that men receive through patriarchy (and, by extension, the perpetuation of men’s violence against women), and the ways in which they may be invested in and benefit from gender inequality and dominant ideas of masculinity as a result. There are a number of ways in which these power dynamics risk being reproduced if the presence of men increases within feminist movements led by women and based around the experiences and injustices they suffer. Given this and the unequal power and privilege that different men hold, it is not surprising that men’s relationships with women’s groups were not uniformly positive in any of the countries we studied.

In our survey, we asked men about the possible risks of more men taking a public stance on violence against women. The respondents’ views on each of these factors were quite mixed, demonstrating the complex and contentious nature of the dangers associated with men’s activism to end violence against women. One of the risks we included in the survey was ‘increased conflict between women’s groups and men’s groups’. In fact, this was the risk out of the six we identified that the respondents were least likely to agree with. Just over a quarter (28 per cent) agreed with this statement and the remaining three quarters didn’t know, disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. There were no respondents at all that strongly agreed.

While in one sense it might be seen as positive that so many respondents did not see this as a risk, it is possible that some were seeing things through ‘rose tinted glasses’ and being overly optimistic about the challenges. For example, 38 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that ‘men diverting money from initiatives to support women’ was a risk, and 47 per cent agreed that ‘male activists not behaving in non-violent and gender-equal ways’ was a risk. It therefore seems contradictory that there would not be increased conflict between women’s groups and men’s groups. Respondents may have therefore found in their own work that these issues were less likely to arise in practice, or had perhaps found ways of overcoming them. It may be
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the case that there is a need for men to be more reflective in their day-to-day work about the range of risks than can come about as a result of men’s involvement. This could also be concerning in that it may suggest that in some cases, men are not giving sufficient attention to the consequences of their activism on the broader feminist violence against women movement to be able to know the answers to these questions – or perhaps to have enough awareness of the risks that their involvement can create.

In the interviews we were able to explore these issues in greater depth. One quote from a Spanish interviewee summarised the relationship between feminist women’s groups and profeminist men’s groups as ‘good relations, but not close relations’ (Pablo, Spain). This working ‘side by side’, in ‘parallel’, rather than necessarily ‘together’ is a good way of summarising what we found across the board. However, there were also examples of far more rocky relationships. There was a tendency by some interviewees to categorise ‘groups’ or ‘sections’
of the feminist violence against women movement; with some such groups or organisations seen as more likely than others to accept the idea that there was space for men to be involved. Some doubted there were any benefits at all to men engaging in this work. The following two quotes show examples of this, whereby Jon differentiates between ‘a section’ of the movement versus the rest, and Abbas differentiates between the women’s organisation he is a trustee of versus other women’s organisations.

There has been a section of the feminist movement who have supported us and say ‘go on, stand with us’, and so on. (Jon, Spain)

The women’s organisation I am a trustee of, they want me to get involved, so they’ve been quite supportive in that respect. (Abbas, UK)

As with some of the survey responses, in such instances (and this was only the case with a minority of the interviewees) there appeared to be relatively little critical awareness expressed about the dangers that could accompany this approach, such as the potential for men to take over feminist spaces and diminish women’s voices and leadership within them. This was also found in Wright’s (2009) UK study, which found that male allies would agree with feminist movements ‘up to a certain point’ or that they could be less supportive of those they saw as ‘radical’ or extreme’. This was reported to be less often the case in Sweden, where more time seemed to be spent within NGOs on critical awareness than in Spain and the UK. This might reflect national differences in how feminist movement and gender equality politics involving men have been interconnected in the Swedish case (Florin and Nilsson, 2000; Holli et al, 2005; Hearn et al, 2012). In fact, previous research on profeminist men in Sweden suggests that criticism and suspicion from women’s groups and the feminist movement is both anticipated and preferred by men, a cautionary position towards other men that profeminist men shared (Egeberg Holmgren, 2007, 2011; Egeberg Holmgren and Hearn 2009).

Some of the Spanish interviewees mentioned that for a long time there was an attitude of suspicion and distrust towards men’s groups, in particular from the ‘state feminism’ of the Institute for Women, with the concern that that they were ‘taking over’ their space. However, participants felt that since the 2000s men’s anti-violence groups have gradually won the respect and support of the women’s movement,
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through practice and time, and by demonstrating that they take accountability seriously. This has also varied with different feminist groups; for example, it was noted that feminists in the academy have generally been more open towards men working in this area.

In a small number of cases, interviewees had expectations of women’s groups that were unrealistic. For example, one UK participant talked about some women’s organisations being unreceptive to men and giving as an example a time that he invited a women’s group by email to work with him on a project he was running. In his interview he talked about feeling disappointed that the organisation had not even taken the time to reply to him. He explained the lack of reply as being because he was a man working in the area of violence against women and that the women’s organisation would not want to work with him on the basis of his sex. However, the women’s organisation in question is under-resourced, over-worked with serious life-threatening cases of male violence, and it is likely that many researchers’ emails go unanswered regardless of the sex of the researcher. In this example, it felt as though either the interviewee had expected a certain ‘pedestal’ status as a man that they did not receive, or they did not understand the pressures faced by frontline women’s organisations and in particular the many requests they get from students and researchers that can threaten to overwhelm their services at times.

Some of the Spanish interviewees also pointed to some difficulties they had experienced in working with or alongside feminist groups. One said that ‘there are a few women’s lobbies that don’t like men participating in feminism’, suggesting they ‘need a space on their own to feel safe’ (Juan, Spain). More specifically, this meant that some women’s groups did not like men participating in the annual march on 25 November for the Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. Since 1981, this date has been marked internationally in memory of the murder of the Mirabal sisters by the government of the Dominican Republic on 25 November 1960. One consequence was that pro-feminist men have organised their own marches and candlelit vigils against violence against women on 21 October every year, in a growing number of cities and towns, since the first one was held in Seville in 2006. These were open to men and women, and were organised intentionally to be separate from the November and March events to avoid encroaching on already existing women’s events.

Similarly, in the UK there has been some criticism that the White Ribbon Campaign’s primary day of action, ‘White Ribbon Day’, is held on 25 November because it could be seen as a symbolically important
day of feminist activism being taken over by male anti-violence activists. However, at the same time, one of the Spanish interviewees described how early responses to such activities were deemed by many – men and women – to be a form of gender treachery: ‘Back in the 1960s we always had sort of people bothering you, writing to you, telling you “you are a traitor” because women were taking the best part of it [already have the benefits in society]’ (Jon, Spain).

It was certainly the case that some men felt that they were stuck between a rock and a hard place. Sometimes these views were expressed with an understanding about why women’s organisations might be cautious or suspicious about men’s involvement in anti-violence work, however on other occasions some of the interviewees appeared to feel that the violence against women field should be more receptive towards men. One interviewee discussed how, when he first started speaking out about violence against women, he would receive criticisms both from feminist and anti-feminist groups, highlighting the range of different viewpoints that have to be navigated when seeking to engage with men from a profeminist perspective:

> We would be challenged by both sides really, by the men’s rights side saying we hate men, and from women’s organisations obviously because of the risk of diverting funding which was definitely an accurate and legitimate worry to have, but also that we were apologists for men or overly optimistic for men. (James, UK)

We return to this issue of relationships with ‘men’s rights’ groups later in the chapter. For now, we move on to look at a specific issue that can create conflict between men working in this area and women in the feminist violence against women movement.

‘Male unicorns’ – putting men on a pedestal

Frustratingly, it is a well-known phenomenon that men who become involved in speaking out publicly about their anti-violence against women work are often viewed and treated more positively than women who do the same work. They may be regarded as particularly ‘unusual’ – as special and indeed as rare and ‘exotic’ as a unicorn. In total, in our survey 65 per cent of men agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that ‘men’s voices and efforts receiving greater attention/value than women’s’ is a possible risk of more men taking a public stance on violence against women.
This is what Messner, Greenberg and Peretz (2015) describe as the ‘pedestal effect’, which they define as ‘a level of praise and escalating status men receive in feminist spaces that far outstrips what a man has actually accomplished or contributed’ (138–139). As one of the interviewees in their study critically observed, ‘I get up and say something that is anti-sexist, they think I’m Jesus Christ, Moses, and Santa Claus all wrapped up in one.’ (Frank Blaney, in Messner, Greenberg and Peretz, 2015, 140).

In our research, there were certainly examples of this pedestal effect happening. However, there was variation in the levels of self-awareness and feelings of discomfort among the participants. In Sweden for example, two men described being treated like ‘heroes’ for the anti-violence work they did. For one of the interviewees, this made him feel uncomfortable – undermining some of his own profeminist ‘messages’ and also undermining the strength of women’s own voices; for the other this was not such a problem.

The participant who found the pedestal effect uncomfortable described the strategies that he had developed in an attempt to diffuse it; choosing to exclusively mention the work and knowledge of women colleagues when asked about different aspects of his work, for example. Another strategy was to use the opportunity to put the focus back onto women’s contributions in various work settings (eg at women’s refuges/shelters) which had been operating and often struggling for a very long time.

Some say ‘it feels nice that you are coming, I’ve been standing here banging my head against the wall for five years now and not being able to get anywhere [with colleagues], so it feels good you’re here.’ And that sure is nice to hear, but it’s also sad because the ones saying this are women who have often been working for a really long time with these issues, and then, along comes a man and everybody is like ‘Aha!’ So, there are mixed feelings for my part, what I’m ascribed here. [...] So, if you approach a person who is going to give you money for a project; I can, as a man, place myself a little bit behind and like ‘This is not us, we are just a support for the women’s movement in this, and she is the one with all the competence.’ Although it can still turn into ‘How nice of you as a man to acknowledge this’ and well [sighs with resignation]… (Dag, Sweden)

Another Swedish interviewee, Jack, expressed similar concerns. On the one hand, he accepted the praise and considered it a recognition
and an appreciation. He was happy for the acknowledgement and confirmation he and his peer-group of men received when they participated in television and other media events discussing men’s violence against women. On the other hand, he reflected on the situation as it was: ‘Then in the 1990s, it was unusual that men became involved [in anti-violence activism], so it was a lot of media. Then you had these thoughts: have we now taken space in public life at the expense of women who have done the same thing [as us] for years? We only have to say “we are feminists”, then all cameras are there all of a sudden’ (Jack, Sweden).

Perversely, it may be that this pedestal effect that in part undermines the very messages being put forward might also be a factor in getting more men engaged in this work. One interviewee highlighted that concern about being treated negatively rather than positively might be one of the barriers for men and boys getting involved. This negative treatment may come from peers or from any number of different directions:

[They might think] if I did something about it, it might affect me negatively, as other men might see me as not someone they could do business with. If you get involved in it, then men will not react well if you start challenging them. Or talking about the systematic way in which men abuse women and are advantaged in relation to women. A lot of men won’t react well. So it’s almost as though the fact that other men aren’t taking a public stance or are hostile – like ‘I would get involved, it’s just other men won’t like it much’. I reckon a lot of men think like that. (Dean, UK)

Overtly stating some of the positives in terms of social status and positioning was therefore seen as one strategy for getting more men involved. One interviewee took this even further and reflected that maybe for those men (himself included?) that did not ‘make it’ in the ‘bastion of male activity’ might instead enjoy being centre stage in a community of women:

The men would always go out on a Monday night for a drink, and once again I was treated as a bit of an oddity. They’d try to wind me up. But then I don’t mind being different. And I think that’s something about an ego thing. If I’m unusual, then I’m the centre of attention. And I think that, now I’m thinking about that, I do know some men
and maybe I’m one of them, who gets into this field because there’s a paucity of men in this area and they’re not very successful in the bastion of male activity. Oh god that’s a not good thought! (Bob, UK)

James highlights the complex motivations at play:

Going back to the knight in shining armour thing, there’s an element of truth in you get praise for it, I don’t want to overemphasise it, but there have been people who have said that must be difficult to do and well done. And that did make me feel good. Everyone’s motivations are complex. (James, UK)

However, highlighting this as a potential positive in order to increase men’s engagement would almost certainly have problems as an approach on multiple levels, including potentially constraining their relationships with feminist women and the women’s movement, and the questionable motivations of men that might be attracted to becoming involved on this basis. There already exist serious and credible concerns that circulate on social media about the sexist and abusive behaviour of a small number of men who are held up as leaders in the global profeminist movement and critical masculinities field. This awareness of a pedestal effect, combined with a difficulty navigating it, was the ‘holding space’ for most of the men who had engaged critically with anti-violence activism. By ‘holding space’, we mean that it is possible that this cannot and should not be seen as an obstacle that needs to be broken down, but rather that it is a tension that needs to be lived alongside, ‘held’ by continually asking questions of oneself such as those raised by Dean:

Maybe there is an uncertainty among men about taking too much space, and displacing women’s voices? Is it wanted, is it helpful? Maybe I’d be better off taking a step back as men are in the foreground too much? (Dean, UK)

The need for this continuous ‘autoreflexivity’ was also mentioned by Didac, one of the Spanish interviewees, in relation to the rewards of the pedestal effect.
'Talking the talk but not walking the walk’

Our survey also highlighted a range of other problematic issues which can sometimes arise when men become involved in efforts to end violence against women, and which are important to take into account. Approaching half – 48 per cent – of the men who responded agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that ‘male activists not behaving in non-violent and gender equal ways’ is a risk related to more men taking a public stance on violence against women.

Some were specifically concerned that men might get involved in anti-violence work without reflecting sufficiently on issues of masculinity and patriarchy, with one writing ‘superficial change or support, not revising our own masculinity’ (Sweden). Another felt there is a risk of ‘dilution of the notion of violence against women and girls being gender biased’ (UK). Similar to this, one commented that ‘some of these men won’t have an understanding of the impact of structural inequality, male privilege, misogyny and patriarchy and may espouse a “gender blind” approach, which may lead them to reinforce unhelpful messages’ (UK).

Given there are (relatively) high profile cases of accusations being made of male allies using violence and abuse, it is surprising that just under half felt this was a risk. In Sweden for instance, there is an infamous case where a high-profile chief of police known as ‘the Dress Captain’ (‘Kapten Klänning’) working against gender discrimination, sexual harassment and men’s violence against women within law enforcement sought out, raped and abused girls and young women and was convicted in court for these crimes in 2010. In our interviews, one interviewee talked about a case where a famous man in Australia who was seen as taking a profeminist stance was found to have been using violence and abuse himself. Subsequent to the data collection for this book, allegations have been made against high-profile academics and activists in the field internationally. In our interviews, men were concerned about how these actions would impact on other men being involved in this work:

They do damage in all sorts of ways. They make women understandably very suspicious about men’s involvement and commitment. And those men are abusive to women. They present themselves as being trustworthy, but they’re not. That is part of the dominant discourse – men have a whole series of not very savoury reasons for getting involved in this stuff. (Dean, UK)
This raises questions about what men’s groups can do to try to stop this happening and address it if and when it does happen. While there are no easy answers, the importance of accountability, having procedures in place to deal with it, encouraging self-reflection and honesty are all useful starting points.

The personal costs of being involved: being a 'gender traitor'

Some of the British interviewees discussed how men may feel reluctant to speak out about violence against women because it is perceived to go against the gendered status quo – that doing so may bring their masculine credentials into question, as it is seen as being something ‘unmanly’ to care about. Indeed, men may fear being viewed as a ‘gender traitor’ if they are too vocal about feminist issues and the oppression of women (Meadows, 2007). Even if they may agree in principle about ending violence against women then, fears about potentially emasculating themselves and facing consequences for this among other men and boys may present a barrier to openly expressing such beliefs. In this respect, one of the interviewees suggested that men’s unwillingness to talk to one another about personal or sensitive issues such as violence and abuse presents another major obstacle, both in terms of encouraging them to challenge violence against women, and in talking about their own personal issues and difficulties, such as mental health problems.

This highlights the important role that can be played by organisations which are principally targeted at men and boys, to provide opportunities for them to speak out against violence towards women, discuss these issues with other men and boys and support one another in the process. It also shows the need for more men to play an active part in developing these organisations in support of the broader feminist movement to end violence against women.

The interviewees also experienced obstacles and struggles within their personal lives and with those around them (such as family members) in terms of their embrace of profeminism and anti-violence activism. This took several forms. One of the Swedish interviewees told us he has no contact with his family at all, though this is not only (or perhaps primarily) because of his anti-violence work. As mentioned earlier, another Swedish interviewee has encountered a more passive form of resistance from family members: since he moved to the city and many of his values and ideas changed (including about men and violence), his family has started to refer to him as ‘the lost son’. In
Spain, some of the interviewees that were academics talked about the professional costs that working in this area had brought in their career paths – with them seen as studying ‘secondary’, ‘women only matters’.

In Sweden, examples were more politicised while also being personal. Jack referred to earlier days: ‘We received letters, with stamps. “Are you gays or sissys?” That was the net-hate [online abuse] of the time.’ He remembered articles he wrote about men’s responsibility at an early debate forum where he received a lot of comments, one of which labelled him as the feminists’ ‘pet dog’. ‘It wasn’t that threatening, but still, there is a hate.’

Kristian recounts the experience of always meeting some kind of resistance, often in small doses of objection in both personal conversations and organisational work.

I have got this type of internet-hate and death threats a couple of times. For instance, when I wrote about the Sweden Democrats (‘Sverigedemokraterna’, the far-right party) and masculinity. Then the violent threats were instant, which makes you uneasy as hell. It is interesting to experience what that does to you, I mean the fear when someone describes a very ‘grovt’ (severe) violence that they are going to do to you. It is kind of scary. I haven’t been so active in social media, so I have not gotten that much hate. But the times I’ve written… there is always resistance. Especially from men. Almost only from men. (Kristian, Sweden)

Other Swedish interviewees talked about receiving hate mail from other men. In Spain, hate mail was sent to profeminist men too, for example by calling them part of the ‘feminazi’ movement. Increasingly across all three countries, this ‘hate mail’ was moving online. Some efforts had been made in Spain to join together to develop a coordinated strategy against those sending hateful messages on social media, for example reporting them en masse to have them removed from the space.

One survey respondent also pointed out that there can be risks for men engaged in doing this work, too:

I think there is also the personal cost – one which I gladly pay but which I think is often not discussed. To be a man who is active in challenging violence against women and girls, and who does that in a way that avoids asserting (consciously or not) male privilege, is to engage in a constant dialogue with self. That can bring about positive
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benefits, but it also an on-going process, not least of listening, self-monitoring, etc. I think this needs to be considered more, if we are to teach men who take a public stance on violence against women, to develop and maintain this ‘emotional’ muscle. (UK)

This respondent illustrates the value that greater self-reflection can have for men and boys (and the people around them), and the transformative potential it can have for their lives. He also highlights that we rarely consider the costs that may be incurred by men (and indeed by women) who are involved in activism to end violence against women. This is understandable, given that the work is focused primarily on dismantling male privilege and supporting women in confronting the impacts of patriarchy on their lives. However, it is important to avoid replicating the idea that men are always ‘tough’ and ‘invulnerable’ within this work, by failing to consider the ways in which they may find it difficult and even traumatising at times, too. Some of our interviewees alluded to profeminist men having a tendency to feel like they have to take on a massive burden and try to ‘solve’ the problem all by themselves, often in quite a solitary way, for example. This again highlights the benefits of men involved in anti-violence and profeminist activism providing support for one another as much as possible, so they don’t feel like they are going through the struggles involved in doing this work alone. It is these relationships with other men that we move to next.

Relationships with other men

Relationships with other men did not emerge as important in terms of becoming active or starting to work in the anti-violence movement, as discussed in Chapter 2. However, they did emerge as being important for some men in terms of maintaining their involvement in the work, often acting as a form of ‘comradeship’ which often moved into personal, lasting friendships. This was not the case for everyone though, and at least as many men talked more about having increasingly problematic friendships with men as supportive ones. Indeed, some of our participants had increasing difficulties in maintaining friendships with other men because they often revolved around macho or sexist behaviours that they felt uncomfortable about. There were also examples given of where men who were said to be allies to the end violence against women movement had acted in ways that were inconsistent with furthering the rights of women and ending men’s violence.
We start by discussing the influence of men’s relationships with other men at the micro level (in terms of personal, individual friendships) then move outwards to the macro, more political relationships, activities and interactions, including through men’s groups, political demonstrations and also clashes with other men’s groups loosely defined as the ‘men’s rights movement’.

**Men as personal friends, peers and mentors**

Many of the men talked about having problems with friendships with other men, largely because of the masculine expectations placed on them and the experience of being in large groups of men in particular. Even where men were involved in group activities such as football, men talked about not really sharing thoughts and feelings with each other. One participant told us how he had played football with the same group of men for 20 years yet barely knew anything about them (Iain, UK). This was even the case where men were involved in other social justice activist groups. As one recalled:

I was with some activists who were working in another area. And they made a joke. ‘Oh, I’d better not say anything, I’ll get beaten up by my wife’, and I was so incensed by their behaviour. Some of them stopped speaking to me. But I’m trying to be more ancillary now to get a better response, but still stick to the stance. And the one thing that still winds me up is ‘what about the men’. And I’d be asked, ‘can we make it gender neutral’, and I’d say well it’s not a gender-neutral subject! (Bob, UK)

This issue of being challenged by otherwise ‘socially aware’ male friends and family as to why men are specifically working on violence against women was also mentioned by another UK participant:

He’s [family member] liberal and socially aware, but he does think this narrative about gender violence and men’s violence against women almost never mentions men’s own experiences of violence. He would see it as ‘unfair’ and ‘inaccurate’ and part of the problem. So, it does alienate him, and makes him feel uncomfortable about things like the White Ribbon Campaign. He sees it as being, that it doesn’t represent men’s experience very well. (Dean, UK)
Within the field of violence against women specifically, some men found useful and supportive connections with other men who were doing similar work. While acknowledging that they had received more support from women than from men, there were some examples of individual supportive friendships. There were suggestions of differences between the three countries, whereby in Spain and Sweden there were male ally group-based friendships, while in the UK it tended to be more individual based, less organised and more variable in that some of the interviewees had connections with other male allies whereas others didn’t. Friends, peers and/or mentors instead tended to be other men that they ‘bumped into’ and connected with at events that they happened to both be at. This is not to diminish this form of interaction, just to segment it from more sustained friendships where ongoing support existed outside of other events or in the form of informal groups where specific meetings or events were planned specifically to talk about being men in this area of work.

Some of our participants were optimistic that this was starting to change however, particularly in relation to a broader umbrella of ‘masculinity issues’ such as suicide, mental health and fatherhood becoming more widely discussed. It was also pointed out that some male celebrities were starting to initiate more conversations around these kinds of issues:

I suppose there are also men in the public eye who are starting to articulate these things more, like Robert Webb. So, the landscape is changing, some of the social conditions are changing a bit. (Dean, UK)

Robert Webb is a UK comedian who wrote a popular book entitled *How Not to Be a Boy* (2017) about his experiences of growing up as a boy and a man, and the impact that expectations about masculinity have had on him and other people in his life. Similarly, a Spanish interviewee mentioned the influence of books by Octavio Salazar Benitez, a renowned Professor of Law, activist and author, such as *El Hombre que no Deberíamos Ser* (2018) which translates as ‘The Man You Should Not Become – An Introductory Book About Feminism for Men’.

**Men’s groups**

Semi-formalised men’s groups were a route to supportive friendships for some of the interviewees. This was particularly mentioned by men in Spain as something that has been increasing. For example,
one participant talked about how his men’s group would provide both personal friendship as well as political planning:

They [the men’s group] would meet at the house of one of the men, and they would cook and do this ‘men only’ and deconstruct hegemonic masculinity and look at what they could do to create changes. (Didac, Spain)

In some other cases, one of the men in the group would reserve a private space in a restaurant and have dinner together and talk. These groups in Spain seem to have been increasing in number over the last three years.

In Sweden informal men’s groups in the form of ‘killmiddagar’ or male-only ‘supper clubs’ under the label #guytalk or #killmiddag started as an initiative by the organisation MakeEqual in 2016, and has increased in Sweden post #MeToo with support from the organisation MÄN to do similar activities as in Spain and have similar discussions. These dinner sessions are often informal and focus on sensitive topics such as feelings, sexual harassment and violence with the help of conversational guides provided by gender equality organisations. A study by Olsson and Lauri (2020) addresses both the potential and the risks of using emotions and personal experience in such dinner meetings as a tool for political change. We did not hear of any examples like these in the UK happening in recent years, although two interviewees talked about being involved in such groups at university in the 1970s–80s.

I helped organise a number of peer-led talks for men run by myself and other undergraduates at Oxford about various related issues. The title of the first talk was ‘Are All Men Rapists?’ and I was the presenter. I read some Andrea Dworkin, and Kate Millett and Juliet Mitchell. Really that and other talks were an opportunity for men to learn about the issues, explore what they thought, and work out what they might do about it. It was a discussion group. The first meeting had about 30 men, in about 1982. (Dean, UK)

Groups such as these existed in the 1970s in the UK in most towns and cities, although none of our UK participants talked about participating in this type of group in recent times. A number of support groups for men have been developed in the UK, such as ‘men’s sheds’ and men’s mental health groups, although it is unclear whether they have a
political or activist stance alongside their health support and friendship mechanism. Meanwhile, organisations engaging with men and boys about gender equality in the UK, such as the Beyond Equality and the White Ribbon Campaign, do appear to hold internal activities and events for their volunteers to connect, share ideas and build a sense of community among one another.

Where they exist, men’s groups of this kind that do provide friendship and talk about issues of gender and masculinity in various ways challenge the prevalent gender norm that men can’t or don’t connect with each other emotionally. Rather, there may be an opportunity here to open up more spaces of this nature. In Spain, the development of such groups has been seen as important enough in terms of engaging men in gender equality work that it has been supported by some public organisations.

Among the UK interviewees, while they stressed the importance of their friendships with feminist women, they talked far less about men in their lives supporting them. This highlights a potential difficulty – when there are already not very many men doing this work, it may lead to a sense of isolation. This may make sustaining anti-violence activism harder for some men, by providing few opportunities to discuss gender issues with other supportive, likeminded peers, which could enable them to develop their thinking and hold one another accountable.

Since completing the interviews and survey for this research, things have of course shifted with restrictions placed on travelling and meeting in person during the COVID-19 era. As a result, much of men’s anti-violence work shifted into online forums. For example, MenEngage Europe worked to provide an online platform to increase support for members, so that they could share their experiences, ideas and challenges during the pandemic with one another, and counter an increased sense of isolation that some organisations and activists might be feeling.

Visible, political demonstrations with other men

When comparing the three countries that are part of this research, Spain stood out as having the most active and developed visible movement of men against violence towards women. This is not to say that they necessarily have the largest numbers of men, but that in terms of visible and overt political organising, they came the closest that we saw to a profeminist, anti-violence men’s movement.
For instance, a few interviewees told us about several marches held in Seville, which when it was held in 2016 had between one and two thousand people in attendance, with a roughly even split of men and women. We were also told about regular vigils, demonstrations and marches involving men in Barcelona, Seville and Madrid.

At the same time, Pablo described how there had been a general problem in Spain for the last few years that social movements of different types had generally had difficulties mobilising, and that this had also been the case for the men’s anti-violence movement. This led to some frustrations about the pace and scale of the work from some of the interviewees. However, they did acknowledge that even if the pace and scale were not as great as they would like, that they were still further ahead of many other countries.

Comparing with other countries, I think Spain has a movement. We do make jokes, and say that it’s not really ‘a movement’, but it is a small movement. In the media you can say Men for Equality, Hombres por la Igualdad, and they will know who you are referring to. There’s perhaps 200, 300 people – men in every city or region in Spain who will be called periodically to appear in the media, to make statements and to support and all that. (Pablo, Spain)

Furthermore, since the interviews were conducted these political mobilisations have grown further, such as with the sparking of the #Cuéntalo and #YoSíTeCreo movements (the Spanish version of #MeToo) and the feminist strike in 2018, as discussed further in Chapter 4. In addition, the leaders of some Spanish social movements have recently entered into government, with the centre-left PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party) and radical left Unidas Podemos gaining power after the 2019 general election, and they have presented themselves as a ‘feminist government’. As a result, some of the tensions in these movements have been playing out in the political sphere too, including disagreements between the two parties about how radical policies should be in relation to gender issues, such as making the legislation on rape and sexual violence more stringent.

As well as the political impacts of activities such as demonstrations and marches, the existence of a tangible movement of men working to end violence women, as can be seen in Spain, can also play an important role in providing support and enabling men to feel a sense that they are ‘part of something’; that they are involved in a community of like-minded people rather than being isolated (Tolman et al, 2019).
Being involved

These kinds of movement-building activities could therefore powerfully help to sustain men’s involvement in anti-violence activism as well as recruiting more men to the cause.

Backlash politics – relationships with ‘men’s rights activists’

While there were positive examples of more men such as celebrities including comedians, authors and artists starting to speak out in the three countries, not only about gender-based violence but also broader issues relating to men (such as suicide, depression, restrictive gender norms and fatherhood), interviewees also highlighted challenges and tensions that can sometimes arise when men discuss and take action on these issues. This includes marginalising gender inequality as a whole and issues which primarily affect women, and hostility and backlashes towards women and feminism. In particular, concerns were raised in some of the interviews across the three countries about when an emphasis on issues affecting men and negative reactions to feminism are expressed by men in an organised way, including through the harmful influence of ‘men’s rights activists’ (MRAs) in the UK. This has similarities to the Spanish concepts of ‘neo-machismo’ – an ideology to maintain male privileges in times of supposed equality between men and women (Lorente Acosta, 2009, 2018) or ‘militant machismo’. In Sweden men’s rights activism (‘mansaktivister’) is often focused on disputes over child contact, men subjected to violence from women and when men are accused of rape. More recently the activism is related to different strands of right-wing ideology and what Gottzén (2018, 2019) calls ‘affective politics’ (in other words, politics connected to emotions and feelings), located in the internet-based ‘manosphere’ with a focus on sexuality, such as alt-right misogynistic groups and incels (‘involuntary celibates’). The men’s rights movement has not been mobilised to the same extent as in the US and UK (Reeser and Gottzén, 2018). However, the far-right movement more broadly has gained political influence in the Swedish parliament in recent elections.

For instance, some of the Spanish participants described their concerns at how the hostility among some men towards feminism was being strengthened in the contemporary context by the emergence of vocal ‘men’s rights’ groups, both there and elsewhere. As one interviewee put it:

This movement has been there, but now is more active and aggressive. There’s a backlash of men engaged in this movement of men’s rights, and the agenda, which is based
on three things: custody of the children; saying that the law against gender violence has a lot of false demands; and the third one is that there is not real equality but discrimination against men… the uprising of these male ‘machistos’, as we call them, it’s quite a problem. (Jon, Spain)

Another Spanish interviewee felt that men involved in the men’s rights agenda are in some cases successfully using these ideas to get to a sector of the population, in particular the numerous unemployed and lower-paid working class, and encouraging them towards a reactionary anti-feminist, anti-immigration, nationalist – even fascist – discourse. Men’s rights activism can thus be understood as a reaction to social, cultural and political developments in the field of gender equality, as well as other, broader changes in society (Greig, 2019). However, insights into the costs of masculinity for men may also work as an accelerator for engaging in anti-violence work, demonstrating the importance of anti-sexist men raising and addressing these issues from a profeminist perspective.

Men’s rights groups were seen as a definite threat to men’s anti-violence work and organising, and to efforts to end violence against women more broadly. Some of the survey respondents also pointed towards some additional risks that can arise in this regard. For example, two respondents highlighted dangers associated with an increased influence of anti-feminist men in society, with one writing: ‘Co-option of male organisations doing good work to prevent VAWG by men seeking to use this agenda to promote more negative opinions’ (UK). A Spanish respondent commented that ‘The greatest risk is the reaction of the neo-machismo groups that are still very strong and have a lot of money thanks to the support of administrations and institutions such as the churches.’ There is thus a danger that such groups can attract men who become interested in issues around gender, or feel some sense of grievance or dissatisfaction in relation to their position in society (perhaps connected to a sense of masculine entitlement), but who have not engaged with feminism or have reacted defensively and with hostility towards it (Flood, Dragiewicz and Pease, 2020). There is a real need for profeminist men’s groups to provide a positive counterpoint to this and demonstrate to more men and boys the value of feminism and how it can help them to make sense of and deal with the problems they experience.
Summary

In Chapter 2 we described how women as individuals, as family members and within women’s anti-violence organisations were important in supporting men to become involved and to start speaking out publicly about violence against women. This chapter has shown that their role in supporting men once they were involved in this area of activism is also an important one. Where men were challenged by women about their involvement, this critique was both given and received in different ways. Likewise, both the challenges and the opportunities involved in the ‘pedestal effect’ were also experienced and acted upon in different ways. There was not a clear division in terms of how this was experienced by men from different counties.

Just as there were different (though generally positive) experiences of interactions with the women’s movement, so too were there different experiences of interactions with other men. Whereas men as individuals or within groups or organisations did not play a significant role in supporting men to engage, they did emerge as more important for men once they were involved. Some of this was at a level of support, providing ‘comradeship’ either as an individual friendship or as part of a group. Such group support was less likely in the UK compared to Sweden or Spain. On a political, activist level, the UK lagged behind in terms of men organising to end violence against women together, with Spain holding public actions on a scale that the UK feels a long way away from achieving. With greater notoriety and support though came a greater visible backlash, and men in Sweden and Spain talked more in their interviews than men in the UK sample about negative experiences with men who were hostile to the violence against women movement (so called ‘men’s rights activists’).

Certainly, there was a situation where some men were stuck between a rock and a hard place – they were not part of the feminist women’s movement, but were not (at least for most of the men we interviewed) fully part of a dynamic, progressive men’s movement. Some men were positioned as an ‘outsider’ to some extent from other men; some interviewees found it difficult to join in with traditional male friendship groups. Others did have these groups, for example through sports teams, but received little to no personal support through these friendship groups in relation to their work on violence against women. Meanwhile, while the potential threats of men to the women’s movement were acknowledged to some extent, the new threat on the horizon is undoubtedly an ideological backlash from other men’s groups in the form of ‘men’s rights activists’ and potentially wider society generally.