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President Obama Models Men's Leadership in Halting Sexual Assault

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Activists and advocates who have been working for decades to change the attitudes and beliefs that sustain epidemic levels of sexual violence achieved a significant milestone last week. Finally, a president of the United States -- The Most Powerful Man in the World -- used the power of his office to shine a light on the critical role of men in preventing violence against women.

President Obama, in a White House event at which he announced the formation of a special White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, went further than he -- or any other American president -- has ever done in terms of getting to the heart of the cultural change necessary for prevention efforts to succeed. Going beyond the tired, cookie-cutter statements that politicians typically make about this issue, like "everyone needs to work together to support victims and end this scourge," the president said:

"We've got to keep teaching young men in particular to show women the respect they deserve and to recognize sexual violence and be outraged by it, and to do their part to stop it from happening in the first place. During our discussion earlier today, we talked about (how) I want every young man in America to feel some strong peer pressure in terms of how they are supposed to behave and treat women. And that starts before they get to college."

The president continued by making it clear that adult men -- especially fathers -- have an indispensable role to play:

"So those of us who are fathers have an obligation to transmit that information. But we can do more to make sure that every young man out there -- whether they're in junior high or high school or college or beyond -- understands what's expected of them and what it means to be a man, and to intervene if they see somebody else acting inappropriately."

The president's direct, gender-specific language about men's leadership on this issue is both refreshing and affirming, especially for those who understand that preventing sexual violence requires nothing less than a transformation in our cultural beliefs about manhood. Women working in the field of sexual assault prevention have been saying for years that

challenging men's sexist attitudes and beliefs -- across the socioeconomic, racial, ethnic and religious spectrum -- is central to combating gender violence.

In so doing, they have often been accused by small-minded and defensive men of being male-bashing "feminazis." Now that the (male) commander-in-chief has framed rape prevention as a men's issue, the pressure to prevent crimes of sexual violence might now move more squarely onto the shoulders of men and boys, where it rightly belongs.

The president's comments are also energizing and inspiring for the growing number of men, on college campuses and in communities, who are partnering with women to develop sexual assault prevention initiatives that actively engage men. Of course both women and men are the victims of sexual violence; most programs today acknowledge and address the special needs of male victims. Nonetheless it is important to be clear in the design and implementation of prevention strategies that regardless of the sex of the victim, sexual violence is perpetrated overwhelmingly by men.

On a personal note, it was gratifying to hear the president express his position in language that some of us in social justice-centered gender violence prevention work have been using for more than twenty years. When my colleagues and I created the Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) program, one of our central goals was to spark a conversation among men (and later, women) about sexual and domestic violence, which for too long had been seen as "women's issues" that somehow didn't directly involve men.

We called the pedagogical method we developed to encourage men's engagement the "bystander approach." By inviting men to be empowered bystanders rather than indicting them as potential rapists, we hoped to expand the number of men who saw these issues as their own. Ultimately, we hoped to help catalyze a larger change in the cultural definition of manhood away from one associated with power and control, and sexual entitlement to women's bodies.

We believed we could change social norms in male culture by focusing on what men and young men could do and say to their friends, teammates, fraternity brothers, etc. that would make sexist abuse unacceptable -- not only because it was illegal and might get them in trouble -- but because it was wrong and the peer group itself did not accept it.

We encouraged young men (and old) to examine their own sexism, and challenged them to speak up when they saw others acting abusively or perpetuating damaging stereotypes about women, just as whites should interrupt the racism of other whites, or heterosexuals when they encounter heterosexism.

The MVP model was immediately adopted by college and professional sports teams, and spread quickly to general populations of male and female students in high schools and colleges. Later, influential institutions like the U.S. military signed on. The first MVP training in the military was held in the Marine Corps in 1997; those trainings continue and are expanding today -- in one form or another -- in every branch of the U.S. Armed Services.

In the early 1990s, MVP was the only so-called bystander program. But in recent years a number of other "bystander intervention" programs have arisen that, unfortunately, de-emphasize the social justice-oriented, MVP-style approach in favor of gender-neutral, more narrowly-focused skills training. To be sure, intervention skills are important; we teach them in MVP. But in gender violence prevention work with men, what is far more important is to give men the sense that speaking out about sexist abuse is an act of integrity and strength, and not evidence that you've "gone soft" or taken women's side in the supposed "battle between the sexes."

More than any specific intervention techniques, what men of all ages need is a kind of social permission to act on their best instincts and not remain silent in the face of both subtle and overt forms of abuse. President Obama seemed to know this -- almost as if he'd been through an MVP training -- when he said:

"We're going to need to encourage young people, men and women, to realize that sexual assault is simply unacceptable. And they're going to have to summon the bravery to stand up and say so, especially when the social pressure to keep quiet or to go along can be very intense."

When powerful men like the president of the United States make clear, unequivocal statements like this, it makes it easier -- for men especially -- to derive the strength necessary to do likewise.