

What are the responsibilities of pro-feminist men in the Michael Kimmel sexual harassment case?

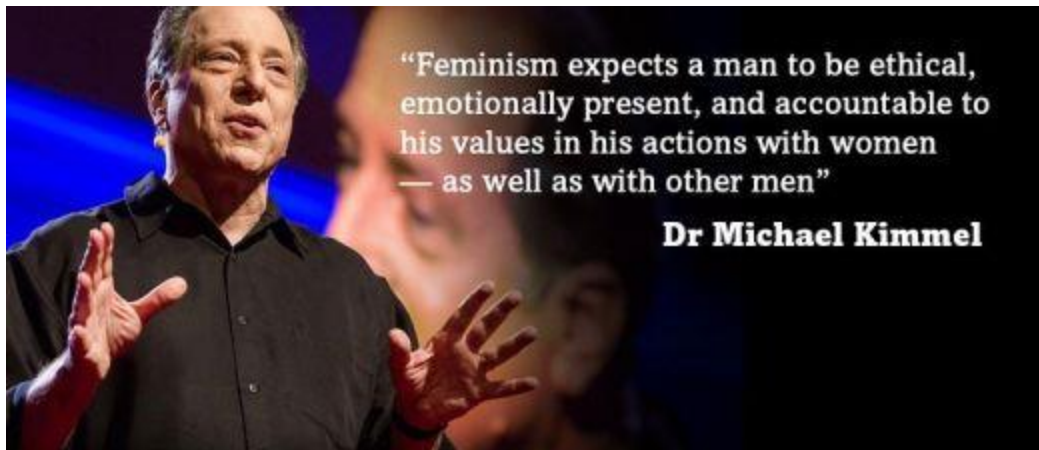
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What are the responsibilities of pro-feminist men in the Michael Kimmel sexual harassment case?

Prominent sociologist and pro-feminist, Michael Kimmel, has been accused of unethical conduct. What should the response of academics and activists who identify as pro-feminist or feminist be?

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by [ROBERT JENSEN](#)



The irony of one of the leading pro-feminist male scholars being accused of sexual harassment is painfully obvious. The accusations against sociologist [Michael Kimmel](#) have been anonymous so far and investigations are just beginning, but we need not wait to take seriously Kimmel's own advice to men who find themselves in this position.

In an article published earlier this year, ["Getting Men to Speak Up,"](#) Kimmel wrote:

"We are in a new moment. For many of us, particularly men, it is scary and uncomfortable. Men are feeling vulnerable and afraid of false accusations (or perhaps true ones). They fear that things they did a long time ago will be reevaluated under new rules. They tell me they're walking on eggshells. Because of this, many men are staying silent rather than taking part in the conversation. And yet inaction isn't necessarily the right approach; there are important things men can do and say to support the women in their lives."

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Silence is unacceptable. Supporting women is our primary task. From those insights, there are two important points to make right now if pro-feminist men in the academic and activist worlds — and I include myself in both categories — are to “walk the talk.”

The first concerns Kimmel’s inadequate response so far. In the *Chronicle of Higher Education* story (which is [behind a paywall](#), though the [text has been posted](#) and [another higher ed publication](#) has since published) that made public the accusations of unethical conduct, Kimmel said that he believed he he has been “professional and respectful in my relationships with women,” but that he takes such concerns seriously and wants “to validate the voices of those who are making such claims. I want to hear those charges, hear those voices, and make amends to those who believe I have injured them.”

The women “who believe I have injured them”? This echoes the implicit denial of folks who apologize “to anyone who was offended” by bad behavior, instead of coming to terms with that behavior. This phrasing suggests that the alleged perpetrator did nothing really all that wrong and that the problem is those who took offense or believe they have been injured. Such a response does not signal support for women, who already face pressure not to speak up and risk retribution if they do.

Debra Guckenheimer’s cogent [analysis](#), “What We Need From Accused Perpetrators Like Michael Kimmel,” offers concrete steps he could take, starting with: “Acknowledge and believe the survivor even if their account does not fit with his sense of self.” She also points out that by announcing that he would delay for six months accepting an award from the American Sociological Association (the [Jessie Bernard Award](#), “given in recognition of scholarly work that has enlarged the horizons of sociology to encompass fully the role of women in society” — the irony intensifies), he “fails to acknowledge the risks for graduate students and junior faculty to come forward.”

Eric Anthony Grollman made a similar observation in a [blog post](#), about the costs to students:

“The failure of academic institutions to effectively punish sexual violence also places the burden on victims and bystanders. For students, it means deciding whether to take a course with, collaborate with, and/or work for professors about whom they’ve been warned.”

The second point is about the relative public silence of academics and activists who identify as pro-feminist or feminist — myself included. I have written extensively against pornography from a radical feminist perspective and count myself as part of the movement against men’s violence and sexual exploitation of women (as well as other movements focused on racism, economic inequality, and ecological crises). Yet my first reaction to the *Chronicle* story was to avoid the controversy and say nothing publicly. I posted the links to the story and Guckenheimer’s piece on social media but was otherwise silent. It wasn’t until a female feminist friend said to me, “Where are the pro-feminist men in this? Are you men going to leave it to the women to deal with this?” that I realized I was not just being careful — I was being cowardly.

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In 30 years of academic and political life, I have interacted with Kimmel professionally on a number of occasions, though we aren't friends or close colleagues. He and I have different intellectual and political agendas, but I have been on panels with him and he "blurred" my 2017 book on patriarchy and radical feminism.

My hesitation was rooted in two reactions, neither of which I can defend. First, the pro-feminist men's movement has enough problems reaching out to men, and being trusted by women, without its most visible writer being accused of sexual misconduct (Kimmel's books include *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era*; *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*; and *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*). Second, my experience with Kimmel led me to believe he might fight back against critics, and I wasn't eager to get mixed up in such a struggle.

Looking back over the past few days, I see my hesitation as negligence. The silence of other pro-feminist men is, I believe, also negligent (I realize that younger scholars, especially graduate students, are more vulnerable; here I'm thinking mainly of older and more established men such as myself). I have learned a lot from my female feminist friends and colleagues over the years. One of the things I should have acted on sooner is the lesson they have tried to teach us about men's responsibility and accountability.

[Addendum: Just as I was finishing this article, M.J. Murphy posted "[The Two Kimmels](#)," an account of his own experience with Kimmel and his conclusion that Kimmel's "personal behavior doesn't exactly reflect the kinds of humility and accountability he recommends to other male feminists." This is the kind of honesty that is needed.]

The details of the specific accusations made against Kimmel so far have not been made public in detail, and I have no insider knowledge of those cases. But as is typical, once an accusation has been made women are starting to talk, and I am hearing some of that discussion. For example, here is a comment from a woman who had worked with Kimmel, and asked to remain anonymous:

"His treatment of me negatively impacted me for a very long time. Reading his assertion that he has been 'professional and respectful in... relationships with women' is painful, and reveals the extent of his denial and misunderstanding, to say the least, of the harm he has caused. I have not experienced professional, respectful treatment, though I know other women he has worked with who have. However, I am not alone in being subjected to his worst treatment, and sadly, it goes beyond simply being sexually propositioned and objectified."

I cannot reach a definitive judgment at this stage on the accusation of sexual harassment, but based on my understanding of the world, my experience with Kimmel, and those discussions I can state two things without hesitation: 1) Kimmel's response is inadequate, by the standards he himself has set for men; and 2) the response of the pro-feminist men's movement has been inadequate by the standards we have set for ourselves.

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All of us who have been teachers know the concept of the “teachable moment,” when events provide the material for making visible the abstract and theoretical. On questions of men’s sexual exploitation of women — how patriarchy operates in the world to subordinate women sexually — this is another of many such moments, for us all.

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