



**“IF YOU HAVE COME HERE 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.”**
- ABORIGINAL ACTIVIST GROUP (QLD 1970s)

HOW TO BE A GENUINE ALLY

Level 2: Fundamental activist skills

Published February 2020

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Indigenous Rights activists at the Long Walk 2016 © Amnesty International

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BEFORE WE BEGIN

If you haven't signed up to join our movement yet, head over to our [Get Active](#) page.

You can find other modules on fundamental activist skills [here](#). We recommend getting familiar with them all if you are new to activism.

If you have any questions please get in touch with us at communityorganising@amnesty.org.au.



Annual general meeting 2016 © Amnesty International

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to our module on how to be a genuine ally. In this module we will look at why diversity and inclusivity is important. Why it is fundamental to the success of our movement. A success which is dependent on how proactive we are in championing diversity within. We'll also look at how to engage with marginalised communities to ensure safety, self awareness and respect. How to recognise the effects of unearned privilege and power imbalances. We'll give tips on how we each can each do our part to dismantle these unjust systems.

What we are covering here is a confronting topic. We're looking at how our actions and behaviour can have a damaging effect on others. It can be very challenging to how we see ourselves. If you're learning about these concepts for the first time you might feel a variety of strong emotions. Anger, guilt and sadness are all normal reactions.

Many of you will also have been on the receiving end of this sort of systemic discrimination. This will likely bring up painful memories of your own. So, don't read this all in one go, come back to it when you feel ready. Have people you can talk to when you need it. At the core of being an ally is that it's not something you do alone.

But, you may also feel some resistance towards these ideas for a variety of reasons. You might feel that your activism on behalf of other people makes you an ally already. That it's clear whose side you are on. You might feel that you didn't have a choice of what privilege you were born with. That this privilege isn't something you want or you didn't know you had. Shouldn't it be enough that we try to be a good person and we treat others the way we wish them to treat us? We'll answer these questions and more further on.

While this is difficult, we cannot stress enough how vital it is to learn about. If we don't, we risk perpetuating unjust systems that impact marginalised groups and ourselves. Systems that we may perpetuate, even if we're unaware we're doing it. So, take the time to process this and don't feel like you have to get it right straight away. It's a long journey to become a good ally.

What is an ally and what do we mean by marginalised groups?

An ally is someone who takes action to support a group that they are not part of. They develop strong ties to that group, while remembering they are there in a supportive role. They know to turn up when needed and when to step back, never taking the spotlight.

Allies are not saviours, they know the people they are supporting can raise themselves up. They champion the needs of that group and use their power to amplify that group's voice. An ally is an advocate within their own group/s to tackle ignorance and getting more to become allies.

Marginalised people are those forced to the fringes of society by mainstream groups. They have this status imposed on them against their will. It's caused by systemic discrimination which aims to keep another group more powerful. They're up against a lot of deliberately placed barriers designed to keep them down. Marginalised people have less access to resources, rights and opportunities. They face discrimination, exploitation and disprivilege on a daily basis. Some people face marginalisation in more ways than one. It is an ally's role to help them to dismantle these systems of violence, abuse and discrimination.

Being an ally is not a literal status you can achieve. It's more of a commitment to a certain way of living, something we always have to strive for. It is a lifelong process of learning, listening and self reflection. No one is going to be perfect at it as well. The underlying injustices and discrimination people face are ever evolving. We have to keep changing to face them in different ways.

It's important not to treat all groups of people as homogeneous. Everyone we ally with are individuals with their own circumstances and ideas of what it means to be an ally. Every person we meet has their own needs and we have to take the time to learn what those are. We all make mistakes regardless of how long we've strived to be a good ally. What's important is being able to identify those mistakes and to learn from them. Also to educate those around us where and when we can.

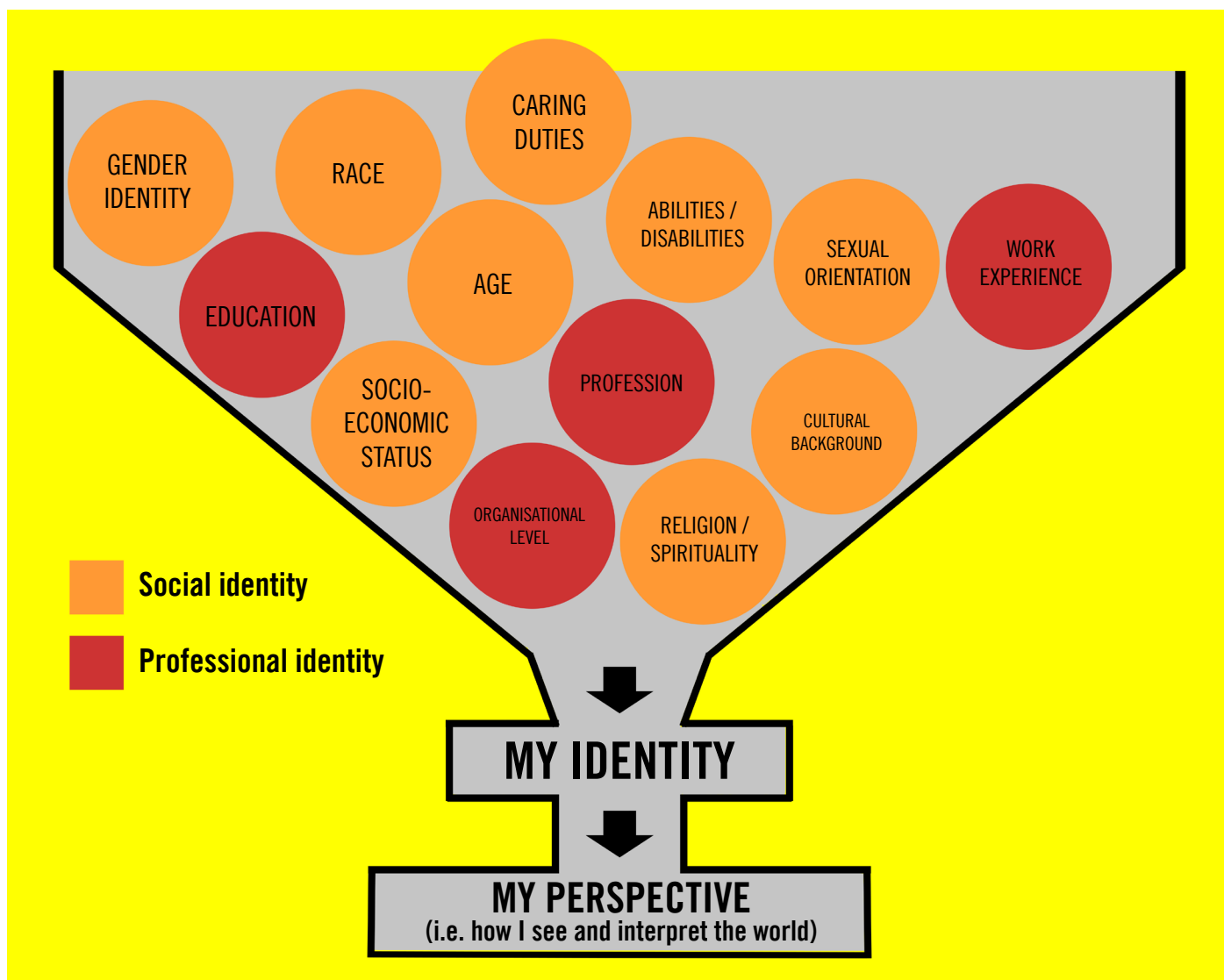
Being a genuine ally is our own responsibility as an individual. It is something only we have the power to find within ourselves. We do this not for praise, to tick boxes or in token way, but to actually dismantle unjust systems. We're also not only doing it for the sake of those affected as well. These systems hinder our own ability to live in a free and equal society. It benefits us all to see those power imbalances gone.

Why is diversity & inclusivity important?

It's only natural that people want to see a reflection of themselves in the movement they are part of. But, a movement cannot say it is diverse and inclusive and then it magically comes to be. There has to be a will within to do it. Everyone has to champion it and there has to be real and genuine change to achieve it. There is a huge danger in claiming we are diverse and inclusive when in reality we're not.

Amnesty is a global movement fighting for a universal cause that affects us all. Defending human rights is what brings us together. We do this not on behalf of others, but with them. Our movement needs to be a space where anyone can join. If people do not feel safe being a part of Amnesty then we are doing something very wrong and we have not made this a place where diversity can flourish.

But what do we mean by diversity? What does it look like? Well, diversity comes in a lot of different forms. Here's one way of visually explaining it with a few examples.



Each of these examples gives people different experiences and ways of thinking. One major benefit of being a diverse movement are the different perspectives. Lack of diversity risks a limited range of ideas and views, you don't see the full picture of society.

It should mean equal opportunity within the movement to do the activism you want to do. To be a leader coordinating our direction. To enter the movement and not feel alone, isolated and ignored. This is why diversity and inclusion is important. When each of us are better allies it takes the movement one step closer towards achieving it.

What is privilege?

At this point we hope there is an understanding about why it's important to be an ally. Also why we need to champion diversity and inclusion to create a movement that is welcome to all. But, before we get more into how to be an ally there are some more things we need to cover. First we need to talk about privilege, because it's hard to be an ally without understanding what that is.

Privilege is a term you might have heard used before, but not completely known what it meant. That's okay, it's kind of complex. We're only going to be giving an introduction here, so make sure you go out and find out more. We recommend that you seek out the views of oppressed people on the topic. You can do this by looking for experts on this topic online or through published media.

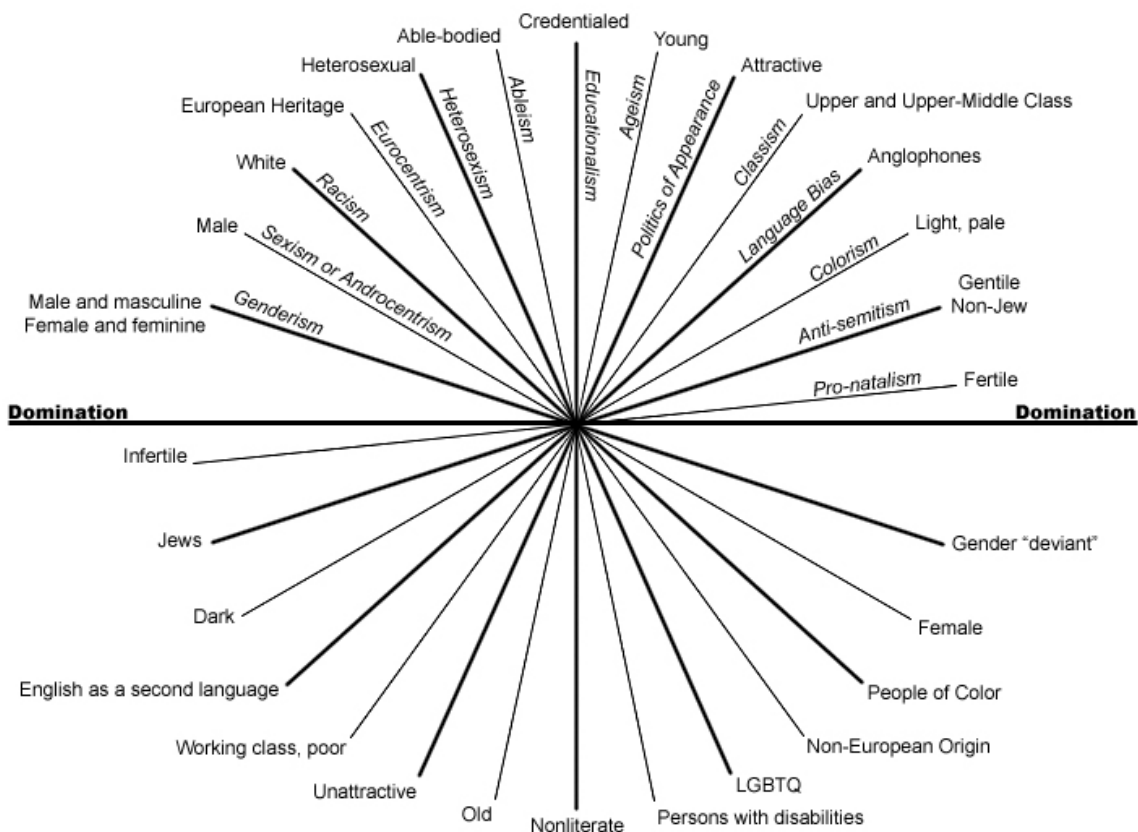
Having privilege means you have certain benefits in society that others don't. These benefits come from being part of a particular group and not from having earned them. Our society gives and takes privilege based on aspects of our identity. Aspects that, for the most part, we have no control over. It goes back to things like race, gender, sexuality, etc.

This privilege is both the cause and byproduct of the unjust systems we have been referring to. It can be difficult to notice if you are someone with a lot of privileges. But for those that don't have it, it's a daily reminder of how oppressive and unequal society is. But, we can't divide people into those with and without privilege. It's more of a spectrum, where many of us have some form of it.

Below we have included something known as an axis of privilege. It takes some of the most common forms of privilege and shows the oppression it creates. The aspects of identity at the top are the dominant groups in society. Those at the bottom are the groups that face discrimination and oppression.

Intersecting Axes of Privilege, Domination, and Oppression

Adapted from Kathryn Pauly Morgan, "Describing the Emperor's New Clothes: Three Myths of Educational (In)Equality," The Gender Question in Education: Theory, Pedagogy & Politics, Ann Diller et al., Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996.



You'll tend to find that you have aspects of your identity on both sides. But, if you have a lot more aspects at the top then you are much higher on the privilege spectrum. That's why we say that one form of privilege doesn't cancel out another. It all adds up to form your particular circumstances.

We call this intersectionality. That's where aspects of our identity overlap with one another. Race with gender, class with sexuality, etc.

This is something we have to take into account when we look at an oppressive system. We have to acknowledge the different experiences people have within it. Are you ending a form of discrimination in a way that benefits all that experience it? Or does it only benefit the more privileged within that oppressed group. All that achieves is to deepen the divide between those with privilege and those without.

For example what if you start a campaign on women's rights that doesn't take sexuality and race into account. If you win it decreases some of the oppression experienced by white women, but less so for women of colour and women in the LGBTQI+ community. Vice versa a campaign on LGBTQI+ rights without race and gender as a focus will benefit LGBTQI+ men more than it does women and people of colour.

We have to think about how our actions affect not only one group of people, but all groups. We need to make sure we're taking into account everyone's experiences. That we're not doing anything to create further oppression and discrimination. We can do that by making sure all people have representation, that their voices are being heard. That they not only have a say in the solution, but can lead on it too. To start with, look around "the room" and see who is missing. Work out the reason why that is. It's not a legitimate movement for change unless everyone affected is there and working together as allies.

Having a lot of privilege does not make you a bad person. Nor does it mean you haven't experienced hardship or worked hard to get where you are. It does mean that you have had less hardship and barriers than others though.

It means you experienced less discrimination and oppression based on who you are. This knowledge can bring up a lot of unpleasant feelings, that's a normal reaction. That discomfort comes from challenging our worldviews. These are great moments to reflect on why that discomfort is there. We can use it to push ourselves towards positive change.

Take time to process those feelings. Do not dwell on them though. However if the marginalised can live with the discomfort of constantly justifying their existence, we can sit with the discomfort of hearing about it. If you accept that your privilege exists you can use it for positive effect.



Using the privilege of living in a free democracy to benefit those that don't in 2019 © Amnesty International

Also we're not talking about taking away the benefits that come with privilege. The goal isn't for privileged people to start experiencing the same oppression as the marginalised. When we get rid of privilege and the systems that support it, everyone gets to enjoy the same benefits. In fact they are no longer "benefits" because it becomes a normal experience for everyone.

To get there we need to be able to identify when privilege is being used. We can change laws that have a disproportionate or discriminatory effect on others. We can normalise diversity and inclusion so no group has power over another. We can call people out for strengthening these oppressive systems through blatant discrimination. We can champion and amplify diverse voices rather than our own. We all have a responsibility to challenge privilege, then bit by bit our society will become equal and fair.

How to be a genuine ally

Okay, now we're ready to talk about how to be a genuine ally. We'll give you some general things to keep in mind. Remember that every group and individual you meet will have their own preferences which you need to find out.

First you need to have a think about how deep you want your allyship to be. You might give peripheral support, which could be online or through people you know. Your role might be to make sure people in your circles are aware of the issue and doing more about it. This is an indirect allyship in which you might not have contact with the people you are allying with. As long as you are not misrepresenting them it's okay to do it this way. **Share messages from that community to amplify their voices.** Make sure the information you are passing on is correct.

A more direct form of being an ally is to turn up and support the community in person. **Keep an eye out for when there are calls for support and be there for them.** It might be turning up for events like protests and marches. It could be contacting politicians to pass on messages from that community. Whatever the ask is, follow their lead and don't make it about you.

An even deeper form of allyship is to coordinate your own advocacy. But, this cannot happen in isolation from the community you are advocating for. Consult with the affected community, explain your intentions and get their agreement first. In almost all cases this activism should be in partnership and again by following their lead. **These communities do not need saviours, but allies that will work in solidarity. Make sure your activities line up with what they are calling for.**

Now that you have more of an idea about what level of support you want to give, here are some other steps. Before you engage with the community gain some knowledge first.

- What issues are they facing?
- How did these issues come about?
- How can you show cultural sensitivity?
- What are the protocols, language and terminology in the community you should be aware of?
- Who are the local leaders in that community?

There's a lot you should find out and it is not the responsibility of the community to educate you about it. If you find people in that community offering to educate others without being asked, be sure to take them up on that and listen to their stories.

The community you ally with should be better off or the same because of your involvement, not worse. How can you make sure that happens? **When you turn up in support, don't do it empty handed.** What resources, skills or labour can you provide? Are you taking from their resources without giving anything back?

Keep in mind that these communities don't have the luxury of being able to switch off. They are facing the effects of oppression and trauma all the time. They have close ties to many others facing the same. It is exhausting and emotional, so don't add to that by being a drain on their time or energy. They are also almost always at the forefront of calling out oppression as well. **You can help by educating others and calling it out too.** So that it doesn't have to fall to someone from that community all the time.

Always seek consent for your activities. This is not a one time thing, you need to be doing it every time. If it isn't obvious if they need the support of an ally, ask them. If they say no, then respect that and step back.

These are some general tips on how to be more of a genuine ally. It's not an easy thing, but then neither is being oppressed all the time. Always keep that in mind when you're feeling overwhelmed or unsure what to do. It takes time to build solid relationships and partnerships. So don't jump right in, keep a close eye on what you are doing. That is enough to get you started. As you build more confidence it will become easier. Then you will be doing your part to take down these systems of oppression.

That brings our module on how to be a genuine ally to an end. We've covered why diversity and inclusion is important in our movement. How when we champion it we are doing more to end oppressive systems. We've looked at what privilege is and how it is intersectional. Then we've given some guidance about how we can all be better allies. Again, remember this is just a start. Being an ally is an ongoing process of education, understanding and action. A genuine ally understands they will never quite reach it, that it is always something to strive for.

It's a lot to take in, so make sure you have a chat with someone else about it. Take all the time you need to process the information and then try to learn more. Start with making changes in your own life to reduce the impact of unearned privilege. Then when you are feeling more confident start getting out there and support others. Also make sure to have a look at our other modules on [fundamental activist skills](#) too.

If you have any questions please get in touch with us at communityorganising@amnesty.org.au. Thank you for your time!



Visit the Skill Up page for more activist development resources.

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