

The Power of Privilege: How to Be a Champion for Women in Transportation

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Women have been driving—literally and figuratively—the U.S. transportation industry since the beginning. In recent years, women like [Sally Ride, Ph.D.](#), the first U.S. woman in space, and [Bessie Coleman](#), the first African American (male or female) to earn a pilot’s license, have been recognized for their significant accomplishments as industry professionals and trailblazers. Still, many others remain relatively unrecognized or even lost to history. Today, the transportation industry still struggles to attract and retain women. Men remain the majority and retain most of the authority, too. Thus, our industry cannot successfully advance diversity and equity without the support of male allies, mentors, and champions.

In 1965 [Marilyn Jorgenson Reece](#), the first female engineer for California’s Division of Highways (now [Caltrans](#)), designed the I-10/405 interchange, and later worked on construction of the I-605 Freeway, the I-210 extension, and the I-105 Century Freeway. With regard to her male colleagues, she has been quoted as saying, “Men have always been very helpful; and being a woman has never hampered me in my career.” And while many women have followed in her footsteps in the last half century, women still account for less than [15%](#) of the total transportation workforce (even though women account for 50% of the working-age population). Hence, we must call for more allyship—just the kind that Reece was fortunate enough to experience—and a step beyond, in championship and mentorship, to close that gap.



Allyship is [intersectional](#), and anyone can use their privilege to take action to advance equity. An ally is a person who, through conscious effort, actively promotes inclusion and equity for the benefit of all. An ally takes responsibility and takes action against injustice—but what does that look like in the workplace? And is being an ally enough?

[Research](#) shows that teaching men to recognize their privileges and encouraging awareness increases their willingness to confront sexism. Large-scale movements such as [HeForShe](#) solidarity movement for gender equity address this need for education globally. Created by [UN Women](#), the [United Nations](#) Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, HeForShe provides systematic approaches (such

as this [action kit](#) for university students) for education and engagement. With sufficient education and empathy, men can become agents of change toward achieving gender equality.

But what about on the individual level? How can men be a powerful ally, or even an advocate—a [champion](#) for equity, inclusion, diversity, and real change?

Learn.

Educate yourself. Make an active effort to do the [work](#): research to learn about histories, contexts, and current issues affecting your colleagues so that you can interact with knowledge and empathy.

Make Space.

Ever looked at a panel of experts, a news article, or a C-suite table and wondered, “Where are the women?” [Us too](#). With 100 transportation professionals in the room, fewer than 20 of them are likely to be women. Sometimes being a champion for equity and inclusion means carving out space for women’s voices, experiences, and opinions. We must make space for marginalized people—sometimes literally.

Listen.

Avoid making assumptions or trying to impose your ideas of how to solve inequality onto women or in shared spaces. Recognize that your experience differs from other people’s, and events occur to others that you might not witness. (If a colleague says that someone said something offensive to her, don’t dismiss it just because it hasn’t personally happened to you.) If unsure about a situation, don’t be afraid to ask, “How can I support you?”

Take Action.

Be aware of your own biases, own up to mistakes, and do better. Speak up to *lift up*. With your knowledge, empathy, and privilege, call out any action or speech that degrades or oppresses women.

In [Women’s History Month](#) and every day of the year, each of us can use our privilege to lift others up. White women can lift up and support Black, Indigenous, and people of color; cis and straight allies can amplify the voices of people in the LGBTQIA+ community; people who are able-bodied can be champions for individuals with disabilities. Men can advance equity, inclusion, and justice in our industry and everywhere by serving as allies and champions for women and other marginalized voices.

Together we can advance and celebrate diversity and its countless benefits to transportation, the workplace, and the world.