Breaking the Cycle of Oppression

Becoming an Ally

4th Edition

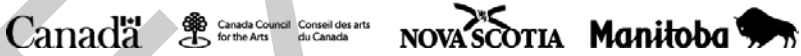
Anne Bishop

Fernwood Publishing
Halifax & Winnipeg

Development editor: Fazeela Jiwa
Copyediting and text design: Brenda Conroy
Cover design: John Van der Woude
Printed and bound in Canada

Published by Fernwood Publishing
Halifax and Winnipeg
2970 Oxford Street, Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3L 2W4
fernwoodpublishing.ca

Fernwood Publishing Company Limited gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Canada Council for the Arts. We acknowledge the Province of Manitoba for support through the Manitoba Publishers Marketing Assistance Program and the Book Publishing Tax Credit. We acknowledge the Nova Scotia Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage for support through the Publishers Assistance Fund.



Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication
Title: Becoming an ally : breaking the cycle of oppression / Anne Bishop.
Names: Bishop, Anne, 1950- author
Description: 4th edition. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: Canadiana 20250224380 | ISBN 9781773637433 (softcover)
Subjects: LCSH: Oppression (Psychology) | LCSH: Social acceptance. | LCSH: Social psychology. | LCSH: Social control. | LCSH: Multiculturalism. | LCSH: Anti-racism. | LCSH: Discrimination—Social aspects.
Classification: LCC HM1256 .B57 2025 | DDC 303.3/3—dc23

Contents

Preface

The first edition of *Becoming an Ally* was published in 1994. By then, I had been teaching about structural oppression — racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, ethnocentrism, colonialism and its many other forms — for almost ten years as part of workshops and courses on community development. These learning opportunities were organized in partnership with grassroots organizations and co-led with experienced community facilitators. The program culminated in the Henson College Certificate in Community Development, which I co-taught with Jeanne Fay.[1] Most of our participants were leaders in struggling communities. Each knew all too well their own experience of oppression — as African Nova Scotians living in public housing or the historic Black communities on the outskirts of the city; as single mothers struggling for their own and their children's survival on social assistance; as Mi'kmaw people dealing with intergenerational trauma and ongoing colonialism; as 2SLGBTQIA+ young people homeless after rejection by their families; as Deaf people working hard to follow our rather unstructured discussions by lip-reading. It took longer for them to see each other's oppression. An African Nova Scotian participant might look at a single mum on social assistance and see someone with white privilege, while the young mum would look back and see someone with a job. We occasionally had to stop discussions from going in the direction of "my oppression is worse than yours."

In the 1980s there was language, theory and teaching resources for discussing structural oppression viewed from the oppressed side but almost nothing to help us explore the privileged side. I hadn't grasped the concept of privilege when I started teaching community development. I had a keen sense of my oppression as a woman and as a Lesbian and had a vague idea that men and heterosexual people benefitted from it. It was my Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian colleagues and students who taught me that racism works the same way; it gives me advantages.

We quickly found ways to discuss these issues in class and started experimenting with learning exercises. Participants began building

powerful networks of solidarity, understanding and actively supporting each other's campaigns, projects and demonstrations and joining forces on their common issue of poverty. These discussions and teaching experiments led to the first edition of *Becoming an Ally*, and here it is now, in its fourth edition and still relevant, unfortunately.

There has been great progress in thirty years, certainly. Most towns fly rainbow flags during Pride month, and there are rainbow benches in front of schools. Same-sex couples can marry. Public events open with recognition that the land was never ceded by the Indigenous Peoples who have lived on it for tens of thousands of years. Even in our small, rural community, 400 people came out to protest the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Along with others across North America, we heard the names of hundreds of other racialized people who died at the hands of police and began to learn about the shameful rate of incarceration of Black and Indigenous people. Women, albeit mostly white women, are entering advanced education, employment and the professions at a rate my generation finds surprising and my mother's generation couldn't even imagine. Who could have imagined any of this in 1994?

On the other hand, each of these struggles has met resistant, structural bedrock. Progress on 2SLGBTQIA+ issues has run aground on issues of gender diversity, with battles over gender-neutral washrooms, young people having the right to choose their pronouns at school,[2] and Drag Queens reading stories to children.[3] Draconian anti-Gay measures have been put into law in Hungary (2021), Uganda (2023), Russia and Lithuania (2022), Poland (2020), Ghana and Bulgaria (2024) and the United States (2024), giving permission for growing violence against 2SLGBTQIA+ people.

Racist treatment is still something Indigenous Peoples face every day.[4] Indigenous women and girls are murdered at six times the rate of non-Indigenous women[5] and, when Indigenous groups try to claim sovereignty over the resources of their lands in the face of industrial mining, fishing and forestry, the battles become difficult and violent, with some involving police surveillance, arrests and harassment.

Anti-Black racist backlash is obvious, with unapologetic hate and violence in word and action all over the world, the rise of violent white supremacist groups and the open participation in public life of white supremacist politicians and leaders, able to draw many votes.[6]

Women, especially white women, may be involved in postsecondary education and the workforce in unprecedented numbers, but women still earn 89 percent of men's income on average, with the figure falling to 59 percent for racialized women.[7] The proportion of domestic labour done by women[8] and the number of women at high levels of institutional leadership have not changed.[9] Gendered violence, trafficking and the feminization of poverty are growing, with racialized women much more vulnerable and lagging far behind on education, employment and institutional leadership.[10] Decades of gains in women's and 2SLGBTQIA+ people's right to control our own bodies, particularly access to abortion, is under attack.[11]

Forty years into the rise of neoliberalism and in an era of extreme backlash against the progress we have made since the 1960s, sadly, this book is still relevant, although I think it has a new role. When I was working on the first edition, I found nothing written about allies in the sense of people working to end forms of oppression that give them privilege until, after the book was published, I found a small pamphlet of a speech by lawyer and 2SLGBTQIA+ activist Barbara Findlay, published in 1991.[12] Thirty years later, the word "ally" is everywhere in anti-oppression work — used, misused, embraced, rejected and interpreted in many different ways. I can't keep up with all that is being written. It does seem like a good time to sort through the flood of information and opinion and try to boil it down into a new summary of how we can all contribute to justice by fighting our own oppression and, when a form of oppression gives us privilege, acting in solidarity as allies.

A Note on Language

The language of equity is in constant evolution. Words that were once terms of pride are misused, become offensive and get replaced by others. My friend, colleague and co-facilitator of an anti-racism workshop in the mid-1990s, Valerie Farmer Carvery, once told me that every generation in her household called themselves by a different name. Her father was proudly "Coloured," the term of pride in his generation, as reflected in the former Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children and the Nova Scotia Association for the Advancement of Coloured People. For Valerie's generation, "Coloured" was an offensive term; she called herself "Black." Her children called themselves "African Nova Scotians," now completely accepted but, at the time, one she was having trouble getting used to.

Another example is the term "Indian," as used in the Indian Act. It is an inaccurate, external naming with a long negative history and includes only First Nations people living on reserve. It evolved first into "Native," a term that was at least inclusive of Inuit and Métis people and First Nations people living off-reserve, but still an external naming with a negative connotation. By the time the Canadian Constitution was adopted in 1983, the inclusive term was "Aboriginal." Because the Latin article "ab" means "away from" or "not," ironically, the name actually means "not original." In 2014, the Association of Manitoba Chiefs and the Anishinabek people of Ontario carried out a campaign to replace it with "Indigenous." This is the choice of many Indigenous Peoples. It emphasizes the connection with the land and aligns with the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.[13]

In the other direction, an oppressed group sometimes reclaims a term meant to degrade and insult them. At first it is meant only for use inside the community and is still offensive when used by an outsider, but, sometimes, the word slips into general use. "Queer" is an example — a put-down into the 1990s, it is now a term of pride.

When equity is respected, so is the right of peoples to name themselves. This has resulted in many new terms over the past thirty years since *Becoming an Ally* was first written, especially in the areas of gender and sexual orientation. Relatively new terms include "Transgender" and "Transsexual" (people whose gender identity does not match their legal gender assignment or physical sexual characteristics, "Androgynes" (people whose appearance and/or gender identity is both male and female), "Asexuals" (people who lack strong sexual urges), "Pansexuals" (people who are attracted to people of any other gender identity or sexual orientation) and "Intersex" people (those with both male and female physical sex characteristics — chromosomes, hormones or genitals — replacing the older term "hermaphrodite"). The terms "Gender Variant," "Gender Diverse," "Gender Fluid" and "Queer" have come into general use. The term "Two-Spirit," a specifically Indigenous term for people who are at the centre of multiple-gender cultural systems, has also come into general use.

As the terms for more gender and sexual orientation identities have emerged, the acronym that describes these communities has gained letters. GLBT (Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender) in the early 1980s became LGBT. My understanding from oral community history

is that this was done to honour the Lesbians who stepped up to care for Gay men and take over many community leadership functions during the HIV/AIDS crisis. Then letters were added: Q (Queer) another Q (for Questioning, or sometimes one Q covers both), I (Intersex), P (Pansexual), A (Asexual) and 2S (Two-Spirit). A plus sign indicates that the list is not exhaustive. The 2019 National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls moved 2S to the beginning (2SGLTBQQIA+) to indicate that Two-Spirit people were first on the lands of North America.[14]

Some other terms have changed in the past thirty years. "Racialized" has joined other terms for people who experience racism. It comes from the academic fields of sociology and critical race theory and is used to indicate that race is not based on any biological difference but is imposed on Black and Indigenous people and people of colour by white institutions in order to oppress and exploit them. "Racialized" also has the benefit of being based on a verb, which says racism and the act of naming it and the people it targets is an ever-shifting process.[15]

Canadians have started using a US acronym for Black, Indigenous and People of Colour: BIPOC.[16] I have met people who are included in the term who use it, but none who like it. Kike Ojo-Thompson and Rhonda George explained why in an article published in *Chatelaine Magazine*.[17] When a term puts all racialized people into one category, Ojo-Thompson says, it suggests that racism is the same experience for everyone, erasing, once again, each person's unique humanity and experience. It also blurs statistical data. For example, Indigenous Peoples are the most seriously over-represented group in the Canadian criminal justice system, followed closely by Black people. Other racialized people are not over-represented in proportion to their population. Using the term BIPOC in this case disguises the seriousness of the issue for Indigenous and Black people. Rhonda George adds that she wonders if BIPOC is an attempt to make white people more comfortable than unapologetically talking about Blackness. Both say, "if you are talking about Black people, say Black." The same applies with whatever specific group you are talking about and, if you are talking about all people targeted by racism, use "racialized."

The words "oppression" and "liberation" were important in equity thought and discussion thirty years ago, but I hear them much less now. I also used to get many requests for "anti-oppression" workshops,

but now groups more often ask for workshops on particular forms of structural oppression — sexism, racism, ableism, etc. Our conversations, too, tend to be about a single form of oppression. The only place I hear "anti-oppression" now is in the field of social work. "Liberation" has been under attack for decades as neoliberal institutions and governments seek to label liberation movements as communist, even terrorist. I don't think "liberation" and "oppression" have been replaced by any particular words. They just sound old-fashioned now; we don't seem to talk in such general terms anymore. This is possibly for the same reason that Ojo-Thompson and George object to BIPOC; that is, they blur the uniqueness of each form of structural oppression and each liberation struggle. Or it could mean we are working more in our own silos now, less often considering how our different forms of oppression are related and how they have been put into competition by the institutions that wish to divide and conquer us. If the latter is the case, that is all the more reason for this book.

The term "ally," in the sense in which I use it in this book barely existed when *Becoming an Ally* was first published in 1994. Now, the term can be found everywhere in discussions of diversity, equity, accessibility and inclusion. However, it has also come under attack as a concept because it is so often co-opted as a comforting identity by those who do not act on it. In Part Four, I discuss the critique of the concept and the word more fully but, for now, I mention it because "ally" has been replaced in some circles by "collaborator" or "accomplice." I choose to continue using the word "ally" because of its history, because I don't believe that changing the word will solve its problems and because, in my experience, people still look at you with a puzzled expression when you use the alternative words. However, I fully recognize and condemn all the many misuses of "ally" that have flourished as it has become popular.

Another word that has popped up in recent years is "allyship." While we need a noun referring to the general concept of allies, I have a problem with this one: to me, "allyship" sounds static, a state of being that one pursues. I see becoming an ally as a process with no end point, something that evolves in particular contexts and relationships. The noun for the general concept in my generation was "solidarity." I think "solidarity" has drifted out of use because of its association with the trade union movement, which has been under deliberate attack by multinational corporations and neoliberal governments for decades. For

this reason, as well as my feeling that "allyship" is too static, you will not find me using the term but rather speaking in terms of "becoming an ally," "acting as an ally," "solidarity" or "solidarity as allies."

My reflections on the static nature of the word "allyship" also led me to question the organization of the previous editions into steps, which suggests a standard process toward a defined goal. Becoming an ally is a dynamic process, always changing as it meets different situations and grows in specific relationships. In this fourth edition, I abandoned the steps and structured the book using questions and answers instead.

The earlier editions of this book included a glossary explaining the terms I use. Because the language of equity is constantly evolving, I moved the glossary to my website: annebishop.ca. If you are unclear about my use of a word, please check there.

The "Structural" in Structural Oppression

For years one of the main goals of my teaching has been to help people understand structural oppression. It is a hard concept to grasp for those of us in the cultural tradition often referred to as "Western,"[18] probably the most individualistic the world has ever seen. Sometimes workshop participants knew the term, especially if their education was in sociology or social work, but they had no idea what structural oppression actually means. More often, the concept was completely new.

In 2020, that changed. As Black Lives Matter drew attention to the systematic use of policing and incarceration against Black people and the discovery of residential school graves proved what Indigenous Peoples have been saying for more than a century about the children who never came home, an understanding that these histories are based in our oppressive institutions seemed to explode into public consciousness. Since then, I have seen the concept of structural oppression come up more often in the media, general conversation and student discussion than in the twenty years before that. Participants are coming to my classes and workshops now with fewer questions about becoming allies themselves and more about how to change their workplaces and schools. Institutional change is the subject of the book I wrote as a sequel to *Becoming an Ally,* called *Beyond Token Change*.[19] Because of the shift I am observing in the questions that are bringing participants to my courses and workshops, I include key concepts for understanding institutional change in this fourth edition of *Becoming an Ally*.

Educating Allies

The previous editions of *Becoming an Ally* contained a chapter for adult educators, called "Educating Allies." I used it to share what I have learned about teaching the concepts in this book, along with group exercises I developed over the years. A few learning exercises are included in this text because they help illustrate the concepts, but most of my teaching materials have been moved to my website, where they can evolve as I continue to learn about how to teach adults about structural oppression.

Thirty Years Later

I began writing *Becoming an Ally* for the many people I encountered who were deeply engaged in the liberation of their own group but seemed not to see their role in oppressing others, unaware that their unconscious attitudes and actions are part of a divide-and-conquer cycle which eventually circles around to perpetuate their own oppression. I was saddened by all the times I witnessed good people trying to move towards equity but being undermined by our unconscious emotional scars and the conflict in our own groups. I was puzzled by how we reproduce oppression in spite of our best intentions. I also wanted to communicate my own experience of becoming aware first of my oppression, then of my role as an oppressor of others. I wanted more people to know how complementary the two processes are. Above all I wanted to create a guidebook for would-be allies.

All of this is still true, thirty years later, as I sit down to write the fourth edition, but there is more now as well. As the concept of privileged people becoming allies has become common, I have seen it co-opted and misused. There are now many thoughtful critiques from oppressed people who have worked with allies. I have also seen allies stand alongside people who are excluded or marginalized in institutions without an adequate understanding of the institutional change process, unable to see how their efforts are co-opted or have even helped trigger backlash. Sometimes the violence of the backlash falls on the allies, but more often the price is paid by those who are the most vulnerable, the very people the allies wanted to help in the first place.

The three previous editions of this book went out around the world and became part of a conversation, bringing back new contacts, colleagues, ideas, models and methods of working and, above all, learning. May this one do the same.

Notes

1 The Henson College Certificate in Community Development course was published as: Anne Bishop with Jeanne Fay, *Grassroots Leaders Building Skills: A Course in Community Leadership* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2004).

2 CTV News Online, "Saskatchewan, New Brunswick Naming Changes Means 'Life or Death' for Trans Kids," *Canadian Press*, August 31, 2023, ctvnews.ca/politics/saskatchewan-new-brunswick-naming-changes-means-life-or-death-for-trans-kids-ien-1.6542571.

3 CBC News Online, "Drag Storytimes Have Become a Target of Hate: Why Some Families Love Them Anyway," December 15, 2022, cbc.ca/news/canada/drag-queen-storytime-attacks-usa-canada-diversity-inclusion-hate-groups-gender-1.6685395.

4 For example, see Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, *In Plain Sight: Addressing Indigenous-Specific Racism and Discrimination in B.C. Health Care,* British Columbia Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, November 2020, baseline.bchumanrights.ca/report/in-plain-sight-addressing-indigenous-specific-racism-and-discrimination-in-b-c-health-care.

5 National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, *Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls,* 2019, mmiwg-ffada.ca/final-report; Marta Burczycka and Adam Cotter, *Court Outcomes in Homicides of Indigenous Women and Girls, 2009 to 2021*, Statistics Canada, 2023, www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2023001/article/00006-eng.htm.

6 Craig and Marc Kielburger, "Hate Is Canada's National Crisis," We Charity, 2019, we.org/en-CA/we-stories/opinion/hate-crimes-national-crisis-canada; Rose LeMay, "Canada's Been Growing Its Own Strain of White Supremacy for Decades," *The Hill Times,* May 23, 2022, hilltimes.com/story/2022/05/23/canadas-been-growing-its-own-strain-of-white-supremacy-for-decades/270686/; John Murray, "Former Skinhead Says White Supremacy Is Part of Canadian Identity." APTN National News, 2020, aptnnews.ca/investigates/former-skinhead-says-white-supremacy-is-part-of-canadian-identity; Jordan Leichnitz, "Canada Has a White Supremacist Problem." *IPS Journal*, 2020, ips-journal.eu/topics/foreign-and-security-policy/canada-has-a-white-supremacist-problem-4757/.

7 Canadian Women's Foundation. "The Facts about the Gender Pay Gap," 2024, canadianwomen.org/the-facts/the-gender-pay-gap.

8 Statistics Canada. (2022). *Estimating the Economic Value of Unpaid Housework in Canada, 2015 to 2029*, 2022, statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/13-605-x/2022001/article/00001-eng.htm.

9 Canadian Women's Foundation, "The Facts about Women and Leadership in Canada," 2022, canadianwomen.org/the-facts/women-and-leadership-in-canada.

10 Canadian Women's Foundation, "The Facts about Sexual Assault and Harassment," 2022, canadianwomen.org/the-facts/sexual-assault-harassment; Canadian Women's Foundation, "The Facts about Women and Poverty in Canada," 2022, canadianwomen.org/the-facts/womens-poverty.

11 CBC Online, "Roe v.Wade Is on the Brink — and Canada Could be Pulled into US Brawls over Abortion Law," 2022, cbc.ca/news/politics/abortion-canada-border-roe-wade-1.6440562.

12 Barbara Findlay, *With All of Who We Are* (Vancouver: Lazara, 1991).
13 CBC News Online, "What's in a Name: Indian, Native, Aboriginal or Indigenous?" 2014, ca.news.yahoo.com/whats-name-indian-native-aboriginal-101500776.html.
14 Government of Canada, "What is 2SLGBTQI+?" 2023, canada.ca/en/women-gender-equality/free-to-be-me/what-is-2slgbtqi-plus.html; National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, "Lexicon of Terminology," mmiwg-ffada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/MMIWG_Lexicon_FINAL_ENFR.pdf.
15 Takwa Souissi and Clayton Ma, "Racialized Minorities," *The Canadian Encyclopedia* 2022, thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/racialized-minorities.
16 Sandra E. Garcia, "Where Did BIPOC Come From?" *New York Times,* 2020, nytimes.com/article/what-is-bipoc.html.
17 Kearie Daniel, "Why BIPOC Is an Inadequate Acronym," *Chatelaine Magazine*, November 12, 2020, chatelaine.com/opinion/what-is-bipoc.
18 "Western" is not a term with any agreed-upon definition and can be controversial. I use it when I mean a thought tradition that evolved in the early empires of the Mediterranean circa 3000 BCE, becoming more firmly defined in Greece, carried into Europe with the Roman Empire and then spread into the rest of the world through colonialism. It is characterized by individualism, private ownership, competition, male dominance, hierarchy, conquest and exploitation. It overlaps with, but is not quite synonymous with, "Global North," "European," "settler colonial" and what, later in the book, I call "oppressive societies."
19 Anne Bishop, *Beyond Token Change: Breaking the Cycle of Oppression in Institutions* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2005).