



# Sober in the City: A Feminist Walks into AA



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DECEMBER 4, 2014  
5:00AM PST

Feature Image via [Time](#)

AA saved my life. There is no disputing that fact. However, AA employs practices and ideologies that are not congruent with my personal, political, or philosophical beliefs — practices and ideologies that I wasn't aware of until I joined the group out of desperation. But, I learned early on in AA that [you do not question the AA hegemony](#), so I kept my head down and counted my days. As soon as my alcohol cravings subsided and I had a few years of solid sobriety, I decided to leave AA and seek treatment and spaces that were more in line with my core beliefs.

Being an AA defector who speaks out about why the program is not a "one size fits all" solution is challenging because, according to AA doctrine, addiction is a moral failing and if AA doesn't work for you, then there is something wrong with *you* and not the program itself.

*For much of the past 50 years or so, voicing any serious skepticism toward Alcoholics Anonymous or any other 12-step program was sacrilege — the equivalent, in polite company, of questioning the virtue of American mothers or the patriotism of our troops. If your problem was drink, AA was the answer; if drugs, Narcotics Anonymous. And if those programs didn't work, it was your fault: You weren't "working the steps." The only alternative, as the 12-step slogan has it, was "jails, institutions, or death." — [Maia Szalavitz](#)*

*This is what most of my clients hear: Follow us or you will fail. If you do not recover, you are a dishonest and unfortunate idiot, and you were born a dishonest and unfortunate idiot. You will die painfully, full of shame for your innate inability to be honest with yourself. Even worse, if you are mentally and emotionally ill (which is highly probable), you will only recover if you follow our path completely and do not rock the boat. — [Laura Tomkins](#)*

As a QPOC, an atheist, a feminist, and an advocate for social justice, I have been told my entire life not to rock the boat. From the moment we enter this world, society begins programming us to [accept and internalize sexism](#), racism, homophobia, transphobia, fat phobia, nationalism, and a number of other phobias and isms that are deeply ingrained in our culture. Society expects me to endure a wide range of harassment, violence, oppression, and inequality while also keeping small and silent, lest I be labeled "an angry black woman," "a man hating feminist," "unpatriotic," "a hypersensitive dyke," or, in the case of AA, "a resentful, unhappy know-it-all." When I was molested by my stepfather, my brother asked me to keep quiet so that my experience didn't upset the rest of my family. [When strange men on the streets "holla" at me](#), I am told to either accept it as a compliment or ignore it and not take it so seriously. When a co-worker at one of my first jobs called me into his office and offered to turn me straight, I had to make the decision of reporting him or keeping my job. When I call

out blatant racism or racial microaggressions, I am told to stop overanalyzing everything or asked to provide proof of racial inequality. And, when I pointed out the sexist and misogynous passages in the *Big Book* (the complete text of AA), I was advised to focus on the positive aspects of AA and stop “harping on” the negative because, after all, my negative thinking is what made me an alcoholic. Minorities are reminded at every turn that we need to stay in our place and not question the rules.



via [America's Story](#)

It took years for me to unlearn what society and my family taught me about my place and role in this world — for me to find my voice and empower myself to stand up for my beliefs. Hence, one of my greatest challenges in AA: I did not get sober to get silenced. For me, not calling out the sexism and misogyny I experienced in AA would be tantamount to being complicit in my own oppression as well as the oppression of others. Yet, there was no room in AA for me to be critical of the program. If I questioned or criticized, I was dismissed as angry and resentful.



via [Jezebel](#)

I had found a real sense of belonging during my first few months in the program. I identified with peoples’ experiences and groups accepted me as one of their own. We all came from different walks of life but had one thing in common: we were addicts and we needed each other’s support to stay sober. Our desire to live transcended all else. I hadn’t felt a sense of kinship like that since I came out and found my roots in the LGBTQ community. As such, I overlooked a lot of troubling things about the program. For example, people were allowed to use whatever language they wanted in their shares provided it was not considered threatening or “cross-talk.” The n-word, the f-word, slut, cunt, bitch – any derogatory slur you could imagine was used in shares to describe others who were not in the meeting, such as ex-wives, current girlfriends, bosses, politicians, family members, neighbors, etc. When people did break the rules and start hurling these insults at other members of the group, corrective action would be decided at business meetings where majority ruled. There were no licensed professional moderators to guide us, to help members process, to assist with mediation, or to facilitate debriefings. I was told by other members that I should pray for transgressors because they were “sick and suffering” and to ignore the negativity by putting “principles before personalities.”

The men in the group, some of whom were violent ex-offenders with anger management problems, would use shockingly misogynist, racist, and homophobic language during their shares and then hit on me before and after the meetings! Vulnerable newcomers would get preyed on by men in wait. When I was new and naïve, I had shared with the group that I had been sexually molested by my stepfather. But, after I started becoming more aware of the dysfunction in the meetings, I regretted that I had shared such an intimate experience in what was sold to me as a safe and spiritual space. In a way, I felt violated all over again and didn't feel safe at all. So, I used that as an excuse to relapse. (I say excuse because, for an addict, any excuse is a good excuse.) However, I was lucky that I didn't spiral full speed back into my addiction. I was committed to getting sober despite these obstacles. But, others aren't so lucky. I, at least, am willing to acknowledge that, for some, this type of setting can in and of itself be triggering and lead to relapse or death. If a person doesn't thrive in AA, it doesn't mean it's their fault.

*Any substantive conversation about treatment in this country must reckon with the toll levied when a culture encourages one approach to the exclusion of all others, especially when that culture limits the treatment options for suffering people, ignores advances in understanding addiction, and excludes and even shames the great majority of people who fail in the sanctioned approach. – Dr. Lance Dodes & Zachary Dodes*

When I got back on the horse, my sponsor suggested that I start attending women's meetings. But, even in women's meetings, we read the fatherly 12-steps that were displayed on the walls of every group I had attended. I would mumble along begrudgingly:

*Step Three: Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood **Him**.*

*Step Seven: Humbly asked **Him** to remove our shortcomings.*

*Step Eight: Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood **Him**, praying only for knowledge of **His** will for us and the power to carry that out.*

Everything is **He, Him, His...**

*Our language is profoundly biased, related to our social structure, and affects the way we think. We pervasively use male generics and that has negative effects. I do it all the time – I can't seem to break the "guys" habit. We still use male words, usually to denote positive categories, like "mankind" but female terms for negative ones, "hos," and "sluts." – Soraya Chemaly*

My sponsor told me to disregard the paternal religious terminology and instead interpret "he/him/his" to mean any God of my liking, even though I was an atheist. Ok, but even still, there was that pesky *Big Book* that we were constantly reading from, the bedrock of AA. The majority of the 500+ page book – the first book ever handed to me in the program – primarily focuses on the experiences of men and how AA can work by curing their moral failings. Only a few chapters are dedicated to women; some are published in the personal stories section, but the one and only chapter devoted to women in the instructional section is titled, "To Wives." Let's delight in some quotes from that chapter:

*Try not to condemn your alcoholic husband no matter what he says or does. He is just another very sick, unreasonable person. Treat him, when you can, as though he had pneumonia. When he angers you, remember that he is very ill...*

*...The first principle of success is that you should never be angry. Even though your husband becomes unbearable and you have to leave him temporarily, you should, if you can, go without rancor. Patience and good temper are most necessary.*

*Our next thought is that you should never tell him what he must do about his drinking. If he gets the idea that you are a nag or a killjoy, your chance of accomplishing anything useful may be zero. He will use that as an excuse to drink more. He will*

*tell you he is misunderstood. This may lead to lonely evenings for you. He may seek someone else to console him—not always another man.*

If a group I was attending was still printing, distributing, and teaching from a book that was blatantly racist or homophobic, I would get up and leave and/or advocate for change. I do not give special passes for misogyny and sexism, especially in my sobriety, because my self-worth is so integral to my complete recovery.



via [Business Insider](#)

When I was first motivated to get sober, I had nowhere else to turn except AA. But eventually, I got exhausted of being told that I was resentful, resistant, miserable, and angry every time I challenged AA's teachings. To begin, no one seemed to understand that a person can be joyous in their personal lives, but simultaneously angry at a system of inequality. I do not believe that anger is always a bad thing. It can be a motivator for change. However, as ilse states in "[Why Addiction Recovery Should Be a Feminist Issue](#)," "[anger] is something that women have not long had permission to feel. In recovery, people are taught that anger leads directly to relapse, and relapse leads to death. Anger is evidence that one has not achieved the spiritual enlightenment required for quality sobriety."

Moreover, not all criticism is rooted in anger, resentment, and rage. Some of it is rooted in love, and in my case self-love; the love I have for myself to walk away from and/or fight against people, places, and things that contribute to oppression. Ignoring oppression and inequality in any form is a *privilege* that I, as a QPOC, cannot afford. Unlike some, I didn't feel that I needed to choose between being sober and being critical of the program. So, I left AA and have been sober (and very happy if you're curious) for over 5 years now.

*There is one piece of literature from AA expressly written for women, a thin brochure titled "A.A. for the Woman." It contains a list of reasons why women drink heavily. It asks women: "Do you plan in advance to reward yourself with a little drinking after you've worked very hard in the house?" ...*

*...Needless to say, there is no pamphlet "AA for the Man." Why would that be needed when the Big Book is already all about men? So let me get this straight. Women are supposed to read the AA Big Book because it's also about them — they're not unique. But there's one tiny pamphlet just for women because women are different, albeit it only in trivial, superficial ways. —*

[Juliet Abram](#)

I do acknowledge that AA can work for QPOC atheist feminists. Just as there is more than one way to be a feminist, there is more than one way to get sober. So, then, you might be wondering why I would publicly criticize AA. [Someone commented on my last post](#) that I "seem intent on sully[ing] the reputation of an organization that has an inclusive nature and has helped many, many people." That is far from the truth. I am simply sharing my experiences because others may be struggling with trying to get sober while dealing with AA language and principles that actually *impede* their recovery. I didn't know much about AA before I joined and was quite triggered in the program, so much so that I relapsed. I don't want others to needlessly experience this if there are alternatives. I also want people to know

that they do not have to believe that there is something wrong with them if AA isn't a good fit, because that blame only leads to more shame, guilt, relapsing, and death. I'm letting others who have had similar experiences know that they can leave AA without feeling like a failure *and* that they can still lead happy, productive, sober lives.

I also want people to consider how AA might impact society on a macro level, considering that studies show that "higher levels of [gender] equality are associated with less alcohol consumption overall." Researchers are still uncovering the multifactorial biopsychosocial factors that lead to addiction. Before we had access to this new knowledge, addiction was simply dismissed as a moral failing. As a result, clinicians relied on AA as one of the primary means of addiction treatment and it has become accepted truth that AA is the only successful approach to sobriety, despite evidence that research on AA sometimes conflates correlation with causation and the fact that "we hear from the people who do well; we don't hear from the people who don't do well."

AA is such a brand name that most people do not know of other free outpatient treatment options, and inpatient treatment is very expensive. Many people cannot afford fancy rehabs, complete with massages, yoga, counseling, spas, and organic meals. Nor can most people take time off from work for inpatient treatment. Further, our justice system treats addicts like criminals; addicts are often mandated to AA programs as part of their sentencing (aka, coerced attendance, which has been ruled unconstitutional in some cases). Because of these economic and legal factors, some women wind up in AA because they are not given a choice, may not have access to alternatives, or may not be educated about alternatives.



via [Pro Talk](#)

There are people who participate in AA even though they find it oppressive and unsafe, and women can be particularly vulnerable given the aforementioned examples of sexism and misogyny. Even though AA has a popular mantra of "take what you need and leave the rest," people are desperate when they come to AA and willing to go to any length to get and stay sober, including internalize and perpetuate the sexism and misogyny found in AA's texts. What does it mean for those who cannot or do not want to ignore the dated language in the *Big Book*, especially when members are told that their lives depend on following the AA doctrine as close as possible? Is there a way to derive all of the positive benefits of AA without propagating the sexism and misogyny? Given that there are an estimated 2.1 million AA members worldwide, how does AA's sexist and misogynist language impact members' views of gender, and in turn, how does that play out in the world outside of AA? Do we have to legally mandate people to attend a program that still prints and refers to a sexist and misogynist book? And, lastly, while AA has saved many lives, it has also failed many others. If people leave on their own free will because AA wasn't a good fit, can we at least stop blaming the addicts for AA's shortcomings?

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***Do you or someone you know need help with an alcohol or drug problem? Seeking alternatives to AA? Contact:***

Women for Sobriety (WFS): (215) 536-8026 [www.womenforsobriety.org](http://www.womenforsobriety.org)

Secular Organizations for Sobriety (S.O.S.): (323) 666-4295 [www.sossobriety.org](http://www.sossobriety.org).

Moderation Management (MM): (212)871-0974 [www.moderation.org](http://www.moderation.org).

SMART Recovery: [www.smartrecovery.org](http://www.smartrecovery.org) n a choice, may not have access to alternatives, or may not be educated about alternatives.