

Non-Sexist Calling

by Susan English

"Wave to the pretty girl across the hall," says the traditional caller at the end of a square. We squirm, smile vaguely, and not knowing where to look, fix our gaze somewhere off in the distance while sizing up our prospects for the next dance.

Beneath this innocent, seemingly harmless call lie assumptions. It assumes that many calls are intended only for men, and that women will intuitively understand this convention. It assumes an active role on the part of the men as thinking and doing, but not necessarily on the part of the women. It uses a diminutive term for women and makes some allusion to their physical attributes, real or imagined. It explicitly calls for the men to flirt with the women, but not vice-versa, as if assuming the dancers have all come to participate in a ritual of traditional courtship.

As a woman, it bothers me when dance calls are given as if I don't exist, as though I am invisible, as if I don't have ears or a mind of my own. These subliminal messages must have an effect on me and other women and girls, not to mention on men and boys. They put us all into boxes which are not necessarily of our own design.

While sexism in calling is not to be condoned, neither is it to be dismissed without some preliminary discussion. It is an issue to be recognized, discussed, and explored; it can be reversed for a taste of affirmative action on the dance floor or exploited for fun and entertainment.

When we dance, we are invited to play a role, and to varying degrees we accept that role, choosing our favorite dance groups, partners, and callers according to the role that makes us feel most comfortable. As dancers, we are given permission to be someone else, if only temporarily – to look, touch, move, smile, wink, squeeze, push, and sidle up to friends or even strangers as we usually would not. It is a role we may uneasily tolerate or one that truly resonates with voices inside, one we would not otherwise play in our daily lives as breadwinners and dependents, parents and children, bosses and employees.

In contra dancing, the active/inactive role distinction is far more important than the male/female one. In this respect, it is different from square dancing. Contra dancing further lacks the patter which harbors

so much of the sex-stereotypical language. I would forward the hypothesis that the growing popularity of contra dancing among aging baby boomers like myself and those of other cohorts may in part have something to do with the more flexible sex roles it affords. This may also explain in part why squares have been driven to near extinction at some contra dances.

Different callers use different degrees of sexism in their calling. Those who tell us to "take your honey home" we may pass off as "corny" or "old-time." Such callers may have accents, clothes, hair styles, and even values to match their calling, and we accept them because they are authentically themselves. With younger, more urban and presumably educated callers, I find it difficult to accept these conventions, whether the caller is a man or woman. I figure that times have changed, and they really ought to know better.

What Callers Can Do

As a caller with a fledgling group in Toledo, Ohio, I am dedicated to building a dance community. I want to be inclusive, to attract dancers of all ages, sizes, and shapes, all states of singlehood and connectedness. While I want to give dancers permission to couple and flirt – I met my own fiancé at a contra dance – I don't want to create a competitive singles atmosphere with winners and losers. I need to think about the shy teens, the newly divorced, the surplus of one sex – how will they feel when it comes time to choose a "special partner" for the final waltz? And I don't want to promote relationships between couples at the expense of other relationships which can develop. Why should same-sex bonding be confined to short quips in the restroom during the break?

Below are some specific suggestions I have gathered by observing other callers and by experimenting with my own calling:

1. Vary the Program. Plan a balance of dances where the sexes will get equal play. If one dance calls primarily to men, follow it with a dance that makes more demands on women, e.g. "A Woman's Work is Never Done."¹
2. Orient Newcomers. State explicitly that dancers are expected to change partners and that either sex can

do the asking. During the break, approach wallflowers individually to offer them encouragement.

3. Give Helpful Hints to Both Sexes. During the walk through, give pointers to women as well as to men. Example: "Circle left 3/4, ladies pull your neighbor toward you and swing" (where the woman is to the left of her neighbor and therefore the appropriate person to initiate the swing.)

4. Omit Unnecessary Terms. Example: "Swing your corner lady" becomes "swing your corner."

5. Rephrase. Change the language to more inclusive terms or figures. This is especially tricky with singing calls. An example from "Just Because" (a la Bob Dalsemer:) "You allemande left with the lady on the left" becomes "you allemande left with the corner that you left."

6. Throw in New Adjectives. An example from "When the Work's All Done This Fall"²: "And when you meet your partner, pass right by that pretty little thing." Use a different adjective each time through: "intelligent thing," "clever thing," etc.

7. Alternate Pronouns. Another example from "When the Work's All Done This Fall": Alternate "meet him again with a right hand round" with "meet her again with a right hand round."

8. Surprise the Other Sex. Following a series of calls to one sex in the traditional mode, give the other sex a try. An example from "The Texas Star:" change "gents to the center with a right-hand star" to "ladies to the center with a right-hand star."

9. Challenge Experienced Dancers to Try the Other Role. Whether to achieve a balance of sexes or just for fun, provide neckties or other paraphernalia to identify the new role.³

10. Completely Reverse Roles. I danced a wonderful ice-breaker in Ann Arbor where "Lady of the Lake" was called with men playing the women's role and vice-versa.

11. Use Humor. An old-time caller recently drew smiles simply by saying, "Swing your corner lady...or should I have said 'pal' or 'person?'"

12. Turn the Tables. Karen Missavage of Michigan has rewritten "Golden Slippers" replacing, among other things, "Promenade that new little honey; she won't think it's funny" with "Promenade that handsome hunkie; he won't think it's funky." Such radical changes admittedly require creativity, not to mention courage.

13. Try Gender-free Calling. For same-sex groups or any group of dancers, devise a visible marker and find alternative terms for "gents" and "ladies." Chris

Ricciotti of Providence, RI, offers half the dancers two-foot lengths of fluorescent surveyor's flagging tape, available at any hardware store, to mark them as the "armbands." The others are "barearms," resulting in a call such as: "Put your arms around their waist and swing two barearms there in place."

In this article, I have tried to bring to consciousness the relationship between calling and sex roles, and I have suggested ways to adapt traditional calls and customs to contemporary dancers. Some readers will no doubt defend tradition and dismiss the list of suggestions as heresy. Others will find the list inadequate, not addressing the "women" vs. "ladies" issue and many others of even greater concern. The point is that callers and dancers alike have a wide range of choices at their disposal. My hope is that callers will consciously make those choices based on a reflective search for their own comfort level and on the implications for individual dancers and for the dance community as a whole.

Why end your dance with, "Wave to the pretty girl across the hall," when there are so many other options available, both original and traditional? Why not, "Wave to the folks across the hall," or bring us together with, "Into the center with a great big shout," or, even better, "Into the center with a great big hug?"

¹⁻³ Editor's notes: You can find Bob Borcharding's dance, "A Woman's Work is Never Done", in CDSS News #103, November/December 1991; "When the Work's All Done This Fall" can be found in Bob Dalsemer's book, When the Work's All Done: A Square Dance Party for Beginners and Old Hands, 1990; and for another idea for distinguishing who's what, see Sasha Bley-Vroman's letter on page 4 of this issue.

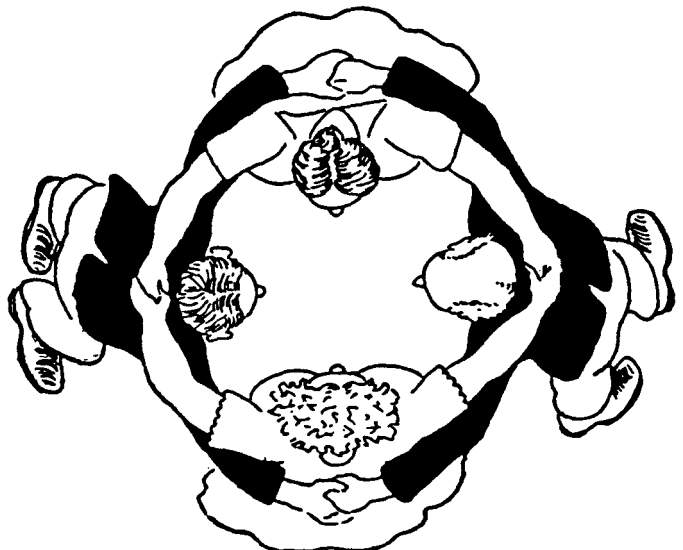


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