

## On Gender-Free Calling



We are a national organisation committed to inclusive and welcoming practice. As such, all our dance events are run without the use of gendered dance calls, and this has been the case for over ten years as we wish to promote gender free calling as a standard of best practice.

The move away from calling social folk dancing with gendered terms has been gathering momentum since the 1970's, becoming much more widespread in the last ten years. Dances being called without the use of gendered terms is now the most common style you will encounter at large events.

A number of leading festivals, venues and dance series, including Shrewsbury Folk Festival and Oxford Ceilidhs, have well-established practice or policies which exclude the use of gendered calling. Some instead, such as Chippenham and The Sidmouth folk festivals, clearly delineate its use so that dance attendees can make an informed choice about which events to attend. Headline events at those festivals are non-gendered, with wide ranging and diverse engagement.

Our resources and teaching materials reflect our own practice as event organisers as well as educators. Some valuable resources have been updated with modern standards to allow the traditions they enshrine to be accessible to people today, such as teachers in a classroom setting, and some will be left as historical documents for research and interpretation, such as archival items found on our Library and Archive website. We inform those accessing folk dance about the historical reasons behind certain moves and features, whilst making them accessible and available to everyone regardless of gender. We want everyone to feel comfortable at our events, to most effectively reach people who are new to folk and engage them with folk dance traditions, ensuring those traditions are safeguarded for future generations.

Nowadays it is most likely that a ceilidh will be called using positional markers such as the sides of a room or location in relation to the band,

whilst a contra dance may make use of alternative role names such as larks and robins. Although the transition to this practice was not smooth for everyone, there are now many top-quality performers, educators and callers training and working successfully in this style.

Increasingly we hear from those running events with gendered calling, that they struggle to engage people or attract new participants. At the same time, it's almost unheard of to encounter an event where everybody is dancing in traditionally gendered dance roles, therefore the use of gendered dance calling almost invariably results in people, usually women and minority genders, being referred to as an incorrect gender e.g. women being told they are 'pretending to be a man' when dancing a lead role.

We want to help ensure that folk dance traditions continue to be practised and to attract new people to them. We want them to thrive, not just survive, and we believe they can be adapted to the changing society around us while being true to the tradition.

Further Reading:

### **From English Dance and Song magazine**

[Lisa Heywood's 2021 Article 'Gender-free calling: why does it matter?'](#)

[Louise Siddons' 2021 Article 'Get into position for social dancing'](#)

### **From our Policies and Guidance webpage**

[EFDSS Guidance for Inclusion and Accessibility in Social Folk Dance \(2024\)](#)