



**Part
6**

Resources for Considering the Use of Non-Gendered Terminology

Acknowledgements

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Overview

Terminology used by music, song, and dance traditions evolves as the world around them evolves. Non-gendered terminology is not a recent idea. Rather, the desire to use non-gendered terminology has been around for decades and possibly even centuries. Social dance forms imitate the reality of our societal contexts and cultural norms.

One goal of our dance communities is to cultivate safety and inclusivity. Non-gendered terminology and/or positional calling (eliminating role-terminology altogether) may be a question your community wants to consider in order to create a strong sense of community in your music, song, and dance events. We remind readers that with this document, CDSS is not recommending any specific resolution. We advocate for tolerance without advocating for language change in particular. We believe that each community's values should guide their choices and policies. We advocate for universal respect for others' boundaries and choices, and respect for people's bodies.

Why Use Non-Gendered Terminology?

This section summarizes arguments in favor of non-gendered terminology. This is a synthesis of statements taken from dance communities' websites and from social media discussions. Direct attributions have been removed and many statements have been combined to reduce repetition and to group similar ideas together. Over a period of time, this task group participated in and observed a number of discussions both in person and online. What follows is a synthesis of these discussions.

Arguments in favor of non-gendered terms:

- “Not everyone identifies as a “he” or “she.” By switching to non-gendered terms, we can make our dance spaces more welcoming and inclusive.
 - Being called something you're not may not offend everyone, but for some people, the terms are a constant reminder that they are perceived by many as an “other” in our society. Gendered terminology, in the context of partnered dance, reinforces the idea that heterosexual is the only normal. The use of gendered terms continually reinforces the idea that men are supposed to do X, and women are supposed to do Y. Having constant reminders (known as “microaggressions”) that imply that society doesn't approve of being genderqueer / trans / etc. is “at least annoying, and at most, soul-sucking.”

- Contra dance is supposed to be a safe space for everyone. For dances specifically meant to create safe spaces for LGBTQ members (and others), using gender free terms removes potential stigma, particularly for men who like to dance with men, as that is the group that tends to get the most negative attention when they do so at a societally-mainstream gendered contra dance.
 - LGBTQ+ people already deal with a significant amount of discrimination, which in real world situations can lead to violence. Providing safe spaces reduces the risk of violence.
- Many people who are cisgender and/or heterosexual still like to dance the “opposite” role. This creates a range of issues with gendered calling:
 - For some role-switchers, being called a “lady” or “gent,” when that is not what they are, is offensive.
 - When dancers don’t expect a certain gender in a certain location, we eliminate the impression that people are “out of place” or are confusing other dancers. This should reduce or eliminate negative thoughts and comments directed at people dancing the “wrong role.”
 - *I’m so tired of others trying to “fix” me and my partner, having to explain to every set of new neighbors that we actually **are** in the positions we want to be in.*
 - Other dancers sometimes give role-switchers a hard time. E.g., they might teasingly say “you’re the prettiest lady around” to a man dancing the “lady” role. This is often laughed at, but really it isn’t funny and it isn’t welcoming.
 - “Switchy dancing” (switching dance roles back-and-forth during the same dance) when using “Ladies and Gents” roles can create additional confusion for other dancers who suddenly find themselves dancing with a male-presenting neighbor or shadow in the “Ladies” role, or vice-versa. This is where the popular phrase “dance with whoever’s comin’ atcha” came from. Non-gendered terminology separates gender identity or presentation from the dance role and reduces those expectations.
- Some dancers see the use of gendered terms to be superfluous.
- Non-gendered terms provide people with more potential dance partners, which reduces the pressure to dance with people who make you uncomfortable or are not a good fit for your dance style.
 - This helps solve the problem of some (predatory) men pressuring more-vulnerable women into dancing, using the tactic that “there are no other women available.” Non-gendered dancing creates a norm of men dancing with other men, and eliminates any obligation to have mixed-gender couples.

- Non-gendered dancing reduces the number of people who “have to” sit out for the lack of a “suitable” partner.
 - Gents and Ladies are inherently gendered terms. Because of this, many dancers feel pressure to dance a specific role.
- Non-gendered terminology exposes sexist and homophobic beliefs so they can be addressed explicitly. For example, when a man says he will not swing another man, or when a woman says that men leading and women following is the natural order of the world, we have an opportunity to start a dialogue about their concerns and how we can help everyone feel more comfortable. For the dance to be safe, it is critical to communicate that we are open to discussing different beliefs. The dance should be safe for everyone, including people who hold “gender-traditional” beliefs.
 - Non-gendered terminology could help people who are uncomfortable with same-gender contact to develop greater comfort, through practice and re-defining the norm. For some, gendered terms could actually be contributing to the discomfort, while non-gendered terms could help ease such discomfort.
- Non-gendered terminology makes dancing more accessible to children. Sometimes a dad wants to dance with his son, or a mother with her daughter. The terms “gent and lady” make this more difficult and less accepting of having a girl dance the “gent” role, or the son dance the “lady” role. In other cases, two boys or two girls might want to dance together because at certain ages, “boys are gross, and girls have cooties.”
 - Calling non-gendered opens the potential for more opportunities to call in a variety of situations.
- Non-gendered dancing creates a physically safer dance environment. c to what your partner needs to make dancing feel good for both you **and** them.
 - Explicit communication is encouraged about what roles people want to dance, and this leads to more explicit discussion about other concerns—for example, whether people are okay with flourishes, and what kind of flourishes. When there is more open communication, people are more likely to give each other feedback. Also, dancers who learn both roles may be more informed about the experience of the other role, and thus may be more likely to dance safely/gently.
 - This is a creative, fun way to challenge dancers to increase their skill, knowing both roles.
- Non-gendered dancers – by dancing both roles regularly – begin to look at dance from a global, rather than individual perspective. Because everyone dances together, non-gendered dancing tends to promote and build a satisfying and inclusive community.

- This style of dancing emphasizes community-building aspects of dancing rather than coupling.
- Non-gendered terminology cultivates the values of consent and compassionate communication, towards the goal of a more intentional connection to ourselves, each other, and community.

For callers:

- Knowing how to call and dance in a non-gendered way will potentially improve your calling and choreography skills because it emphasizes looking at the whole dance, not just what you do with your partner or neighbor of the opposite sex. It challenges you to see the dance from either role's perspective. This insight can help you to be a better caller because it will help you choose dances that are more comfortable and enjoyable for both roles to dance and will help you to guide each role confidently when clarity is important.
- Looking at calling and dancing from a non-gendered perspective will enhance your creative possibilities of choreographing your own dance figures.

Why stick with gendered terminology?

This section summarizes arguments in favor of “Lady-Gent” or other gendered terminology. This is a synthesis of statements taken from social media discussions or one-on-one conversations. Direct attributions have been removed and many statements have been combined to reduce repetition and to group similar ideas together.

- This isn't a problem in our community—maybe it's an issue in large urban areas, but it's not an issue for our local group. We don't have any non-binary dancers in our dance community, and no one has expressed a concern about terminology.
- The majority of our dancers prefer traditional terms. We expect that changing terminology for a small minority of dancers who **might** feel offended will make the majority of our dancers unhappy.
- Traditional terms help dancers more easily identify their role. Most dancers identify more strongly with one gender or the other (whether or not it's the one they were assigned at birth), and dancers can choose whichever role they want. If they don't feel a need to identify with the role they're dancing, they can switch back and forth. But for many dancers, matching the term with their own identification makes it easier to respond to the calls. In short, traditional terminology is less confusing for many dancers.

- Non-gendered terminology has been bundled with an agenda to encourage everyone to dance both roles. For beginners, this adds significant confusion and makes the learning curve much steeper. Beginners do best when they pick one role and stick with it for the whole evening. The non-gendered movement has stigmatized **not** wanting to dance both roles.
- “*Gents and ladies* is what I’m used to, and there’s nothing wrong with that. I shouldn’t be judged for my preferences any more than anyone else should be judged for theirs. Why do some people’s preferences take precedence over others? We should find a fair way to decide what’s best for the group.”

A few common discussion points:

Special acknowledgement: several of these points include quotes from Chris Ricciotti, but they have been taken out of their original context and sometimes mixed with other points for efficiency. We don’t want to attribute ideas to Chris that might not be accurate, but we want to acknowledge his significant contribution to this section.

Is non-gendered dancing confusing, particularly for new people?

No:

- Folks newer to dancing do not have the years of experience from which to base their views on how dancing should be. New dancers are much easier to mold and tend to pay better attention than experienced dancers, who are more likely to feel they already know what to do. This is particularly true for children, who don’t have the preconceived notions about how dancing and gender works.
- In mixed settings, it has been observed that dancers with little or no experience, as well as children, pick up the concepts of non-gendered dancing without much confusion, or even a knowledge that they are dancing in non-gendered fashion, particularly if it’s not addressed as an issue and so long as everyone is encouraged to have a good time.
- It tends to be the more experienced dancers or callers—those who make this an issue—that seem to have the most difficulty with this dance philosophy. Some of this may come from the natural assumption that, as experienced dancers, they have **the** acquired knowledge of how dancing should work.
- However, it is also these same people who may try to shove what they perceive as a less experienced dancer into the place they think they should be based on the other person’s gender, when in fact, that other dancer may be exactly where they should be and know where they are going.

Yes:

- Dancing well requires being able to respond to the call in a fraction of a second. That involves processing who the call is for (which role), where to go, and the specific mechanics of the move (how). Most callers encourage beginners to pick one role and stick with it, until things become more automatic.
- When using traditional terms, the vast majority of new dancers choose to dance the role they identify with, even when it is explicitly discussed that it's just a role, and it's fine to pick either one. As such, gendered terminology makes the “who” automatic for a great majority of the population. When they only have to process two pieces of info (where and how), the on-ramp is easier for beginners.
- Using terms no one identifies with to convey “who” adds a third piece of info to be processed with each call, which adds a layer of confusion. This may not be an issue for a dance with all beginners (such as a community or school dance), but in a mixed group, when intermediate-level contras are called, the need to respond quickly and accurately is critical, and having to process “who” can create failure for beginners in that already challenging situation.
 - Gendered roles are easier for everyone—new and experienced dancers. Whether the added confusion is a worthwhile tradeoff for the benefit of making LGBTQ dancers feel more welcome is the real question. That depends on how much of a concern it is to dancers in the community. If there aren't any non-binary dancers in the group, or if dancers aren't role switching much, or if they don't care about terminology as much as the vocal activists, then it may not be needed. In that case, the benefit of using descriptive (gendered) terms is valuable.

Is non-gendered calling difficult to learn?

- Calling or dancing in a non-gendered way takes practice to perfect, just like learning how to dance or call in the first place. If you already know how to call or dance, the transition will be less effort, because you already have a base of skills to work from.
- Thinking of this simply as substituting non-gendered language, or “diagonal” or other set identifications, for words such as “gent,” “men,” “ladies,” or “women” will go a long way to help make this transition easier.
- In addition, it is helpful to have some visual cue for the dancers and caller, such as identifying roles with use of an armband, button, colored lei or neck ribbon, etc. This is particularly helpful for contra and square dancing, which by tradition uses gender roles to identify what each two dancers are doing. Using a system like this helps make it clear to everyone who is dancing what role and can help clear up any momentary confusion that could arise on the dance floor.

- There is a bit more to this from a philosophical viewpoint, but the basic idea for callers and dancers is word substitution and dancer identification.

Are non-gendered dance events breaking “tradition?”

- What is traditional, and what limits should it have? It’s a good question and one that has led to a lot of discussion, particularly on the impact non-gendered dancing is having on traditional dance today. If the English country dances that came over on the Mayflower did not evolve and change in America to suit the needs of our society, would we have our modern-day American contra dancing today?
- Each generation who dances changes the dance form in some way, in the same way that music, clothing styles, and the way we talk and even the food we eat change over time. Non-gendered contra dancing is just another tradition that has developed to help meet the needs of a community. Used wisely, it could be another tool to help attract more people to dancing and could go a long way to help adding to and preserving a dance tradition we all love.

Regarding “This isn’t a problem in our community:”

- There may be some in the local community who are not coming to dances, thus masking the problem.

Deciding what to do

This section is a summary of a [resource by Diane Silver](#).

When introducing the use of non-gendered terms as a new thing in a community, it is useful to address several issues separately:

A) Should we adopt non-gendered terms at all?

- What are the reasons **why** advocates want neutral terms?
 - Are there other strategies for achieving their goals/desires besides changing language? I.e., are there underlying issues that we should be addressing—exclusion? shaming? criticizing? unwanted “fixing?”
- What are the reasons **why** advocates for traditional terms don’t want to change?
 - Are there other strategies for achieving their goals/desires even while changing language?
 - e.g., if the issue is confusion, maybe some non-gendered terms are less confusing than others.

- If the issue is preference, it might just be a matter of getting to vote on the terms chosen.
- Are there other underlying reasons which, if addressed, would make dissenters more accepting?

Note: We have attempted to summarize the **whys** in this document, but this should not be a substitute for a listening session. People want to be heard. It is important to give them that opportunity. But the reasons given in the previous section are likely most of the reasons you will hear offered by members of your community. It should give you a head start in summarizing what you are likely to hear, but don't present your own list of reasons pro or con until **after** an initial listening session.

B) If we adopt non-gendered terms at all—is it for all the time, or only some of the time?

- If only some of the time, how will turn-taking be organized?
 - Turn-taking within an evening?
 - 1st half vs. 2nd half?
 - Alternating dances?
 - Turn-taking for whole evenings?
 - 50-50 split of the weeks?
 - Some other split based on % of community preferences?
 - Occasional non-gendered experiences to allow people to get used to it?
 - One per evening?
 - One per half?
 - One whole evening per month?
 - One whole evening per quarter?
 - Let the caller decide
- Communicate regularly what to expect for a given evening

C) Is the solution an all-or nothing choice, or could there be a process of evolving from one set of terms to another? How can callers teach dancers to be flexible in dancing to different role terms? In what ways can dancers learn to adapt to new terminology?

D) *If/when non-gendered terms are used, what exact terms do we choose to use?*

Advocates may say “just do it.” But unilateral implementation can easily backfire if the community does not feel buy-in for that decision. It can create division—those who like the change vs. those who don’t. Education and positive problem-solving help build a sense of unity for moving forward with a change. Most dance communities already intend to be welcoming to LGBTQ dancers. In the long run, you may achieve your goal faster by having the patience to use good process.

[Here’s an example of how one dance community facilitated a trial-and-feedback process.](#)

Also see a list of non-gendered dances below, in [Resources](#).

Facilitating the conversation—see:

- [Part 1B: Possible Governance Models and Processes](#)
- [How to organize and/or facilitate a community meeting that will leave everyone smiling](#)

Examples of alternative options—for if/when you have decided to explore or use non-gendered terms

- **Positional calling:** See:
 - [5 Things... Inside the Dancing Mind of... an evening chat focused on Global Terminology/Positional Calling with Brooke Friendly](#)
 - [2019 blog post by Jeff Kaufman](#)
 - [5 Benefits of Positional Calling \(and one challenge\)](#)
- **“Historical” Terminology:** Lately, some communities are advertising that they use “historical terminology,” which includes both positional and gendered terms, as appropriate. For some situations, this can be a potential compromise.
- **Room indicators**—e.g. entrance line/window line
- **Binary replacement terms**
 - Most common alternatives:
 - Larks and Robins
 - Larks and Ravens

- Bands and Bares
- Left File and Right File
- Additional ideas that have been floated:
 - Rubies and Jets
 - Moons and Stars
 - Rights and Lefts
 - Lions and Tigers
 - Jays and Rubies
 - Blue and Green

Feel free to be creative. In family dancing especially, there has been a great range of clever options.

- Leads and Follows

Concerns regarding Leads and Follows

In contra dancing, the actual contra moves are not led and followed—the caller is the leader and all the dancers are followers. Dancers might assist one another into the move that is called, but that’s not the same as leading. Leading implies a level of control. In led-and-followed dances, the leader chooses which move to do next. In contra, the caller makes that choice.

All led-and-followed moves in contra are flourishes borrowed from couple dancing—mostly swing, tango, and blues. In these styles, “Leads” are in charge. In a perfect world, people all have blank slates, but in reality, most people’s experience is that Leads are men and Follows are women. “Lead” and “Follow” reinforce gender roles and imply a power dynamic between the two roles, even more so than “Gents and Ladies.” To use Lead and Follow for contra dance roles implies that only the “Lead” should initiate flourishes. That is not consistent with the egalitarian rationale for switching terminology in the first place.

“Leads and Follows” are very awkward and confusing to call. “Lead” and “Follow” are already used as verbs in contra dance calling.

- ____ lead a hey for four
- ____ cross (the set), ____ follow
- ____ lead ____ along the set
- ____ lead a promenade
- (1s / 2s / actives) lead down the hall

With *Lead* and *Follow* as role terms, we would now have

- *Follows lead a hey for four*
- *Leads, follow the Follows*

While some of these can have their terms replaced, with the Lead / Follow terms, they still create oxymorons or redundancies that are confusing:

- *Follows start a hey for four*
- *Follows cross, leads behind*
- *Follows go left, leads behind*
- *Follows ahead, leads behind*
- *Follows in front, promenade*

Concerns regarding Larks and Ravens

At the beginning of the modern non-gendered movement in contra dancing (in the 20-teens), Larks and Ravens was promoted as the preferred replacement for Ladies and Gents. Some of the controversy about non-gendered language came from the strong promotion of that particular choice, rather than the issue of non-gendered terms per se. There was a great deal of social media discussion of the pros and cons of Larks and Ravens vs. other non-gendered options. By 2021, Larks and Robins began emerging as a popular alternative, and at the time of this publication (Spring 2024), this seems to be the most consistent choice, along with positional calling, which aims to not name the roles at all. As such, the need to discuss Larks and Ravens may be mostly irrelevant.

See also:

- [History of Larks/Ravens](#), 2019 blog post by Jeff Kaufman

Resources

Non-Gendered Dance Events (Note: most, but not all, are online)

- Saint Louis Gender-Free Contra Dance
- Village Contra—NYC Gender-Free Contra Dance (group)
- Boston Gender-Free Contra Dances and ECD
- Hands Across Contra Dance
- South Bay Contra Dance
- Berkeley Wednesday Contra Dance
- Lavender Country and Folk Dancers
- Cincinnati Gender-Free Contra Dance
- Hands Four
- Circle Left Contra Dance
- Rainbow Contra of Western Massachusetts
- East Bay Contra Dance
- Toronto Contra Dance
- Santa Cruz Contra Dance
- Providence Contra Dance
- PDX Contra Remix
- Portland Intown Contra Dance
- Downtown Amherst Contra Dance
- Contra Folk VT
- Queer Contra Chicago
- BIDA
- Colorado FOOTMAD
- Glen Echo
- Madison Queer Contra
- Oberlin Contra
- Northwestern Contra

Articles

- [Contraculture: Bird Names and the Degendering of Contra Dance](#) (Andrew Snyder)
- [Current Problems and Methods in Dance Reconstruction](#) (Parfitt-Brown et al.)
- [Dancing Gender](#) (Craig Owen)
- [Larks and Ravens: A Report from the Field](#) (Dela and Dugan Murphy)
- [Welcome to Gender-Free Dancing](#) (Chris Ricciotti)
- [Gender-Free Dancing—A Brief Historical Perspective](#) (Chris Ricciotti)

Calling Guides

- [Positional Calling for Contra](#) (Roni Wiener)
- [Complete Welcome to Gender-Free Dancing Guide](#) (Chris Ricciotti)
- [Gender-Free Calling Guide](#) (IFVDF)
- [New Contra Dance Caller Starter Guide](#) (Louise Siddons)

Other

- [Gender-Free Contra Dance Camps and Weekends](#)
- [Gender-Free Caller Directory](#)
- [Facebook Group: Gender-Free Contra](#) (formerly Larks and Ravens Contra Dancers)
- [Gender-Free Role Term Usage](#) (Jeff Kaufman)
- [Inclusivity and Dance Terminology](#)
- [The Heather and the Rose Country Dancers Terminology](#)
- [Gender-Free Calling and Dancing](#) (Jeremy Child)
- [Terminology Examples](#)
- [Global Terminology](#)
- [Video History of LGBTQ Gender-Free Contra and Folk Dancing Around Boston](#) (Chris Ricciotti)
- [Gender-Free Contra Dance Events](#)
- [Andrew's Notes on Calling](#) (Andrew Swaine)
- [Switching to Larks and Ravens](#) (Jeff Kaufman)
- [Discussion of Larks and Ravens](#) (Diane Silver, 2018)
- [Gender-Free Dancing](#) (Henry Morgenstein)
- [Contra Contrary to Norms](#) (Katie Okumu)
- [Webchat with Brooke Friendly](#)
- [5 Things chat with Louise Siddons](#)—changing labels did change behavior.
- [GF ECD Calling Conventions](#) (Read Weaver)
- [Contra Dancing: Why Larks and Ravens?](#) (Doe M. Taryn)
- [Switching to gender-neutral language in a positive way](#) (Diane Silver)

Additional resources on inclusivity:

[CDSS Resource Portal:](#)

https://cdss.org/resources/resource-portal/?sft_post_tag=non-gendered