

Dancing with respect

Lisa Heywood discusses the importance of respectful behaviour during folk dancing.

I've been folk dancing for as long as I can remember, and have fond memories of careering around dance halls with my brother and friends as a child. Later, when I arrived at Sheffield University, I immediately signed up for the ceilidh society and a few years later found myself as president, organising fortnightly dances for students. Despite proclaiming at one point that "I don't want to be a caller, because I enjoy dancing too much", I found myself doing exactly that. What I enjoyed about calling, and still do, was seeing a roomful of people experiencing the joy of dancing that I had loved as a child, knowing I'd helped to make it happen.

So it came as a shock to learn that some people have had a far less positive time on the dance floor, at ceilidhs as well as other social dance events, than I have. I have heard several reports of people's uncomfortable experiences. One friend, as a teen, was surrounded by a group of older men at a festival ceilidh and was repeatedly asked what size bra she wore. Another almost stopped going to ceilidhs because she feels targeted by strangers who repeatedly ask her to dance, even when she is at a dance with a group of friends. Others talk of hands in inappropriate places and unwanted physical contact.

One friend avoided telling me these experiences because she didn't want to ruin folk dancing for me. However, I am firm in my belief that it is vitally important for callers and event organisers to be aware of these issues. The point was crystallised at the AFO (Association of Festival Organisers) conference, at a question and answer session hosted by the White Ribbon Campaign, which promotes women's safety at gigs. I wasn't the only person to stick up my hand and say "how can we apply this to ceilidhs?" – clearly these aren't a few isolated incidents.



Lisa dancing at a ceilidh in 2006, age 12. Photo: Brian Heywood.



Lisa calling for first-time ceilidh dancers at a University of Hertfordshire Fresher's event. Photo: Tom Fairbairn.



Hearing these experiences made me reflect on my own experiences, too. There are times that I have felt frustrated by constantly dancing with partners not of my choosing, but it can be hard to just say no. I'm fairly outgoing and confident, but I still find myself making excuses by saying "sorry, I'm not doing this dance" to turn down an offer instead of just "no thanks". This is confusing for my prospective partner, who might think I want to dance the next one instead. Nonetheless, there is an overwhelming social pressure to say yes, or to have an excuse not to dance with someone.

Although women are typically most affected, it is not just this group who are subject to such behaviour. It could happen anywhere, to anyone – regardless of gender or age. We cannot stick our heads in the sand and say, "that wouldn't happen at my dance".

I dearly love folk dancing and as a caller, dancer and event organiser, I want to make sure that everyone can share in the fun, friendship and enjoyment that it can provide. So I have begun to look for ways to make sure that everyone feels safe and welcomed at dance events. Everyone can play a part, so here are a few ideas and tips I'd like to share:

Callers

- Encourage consent ('ask your partner...') and respectful behaviour
- If you do see bad behaviour, report it to an organiser
- If you need more couples, don't pressure people who have not stood up to dance
- Consider gender-free calling (see inset)

Organisers

- Make yourself known, so people know who to talk to if they have a concern
- Consider having some house rules or a policy setting out that harassment is not acceptable and what to do if people experience it. Share these on posters/ in an announcement at the beginning of the dance
- Know what you will do if someone does report a complaint. Listen with an open mind, do not blame the person who has been harassed and have a quiet word with the person who has caused offence. If the behaviour continues, consider whether to let that person attend in future

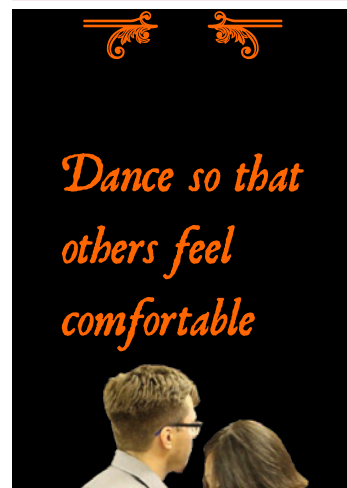
Dancers

- Take no for an answer gracefully. Nobody needs a reason to refuse a dance
- Ask your partner whether they are comfortable with a certain move. Dancing is a collaborative activity, so if you want to do a 'close swing hold' with a new partner, then ask. Don't assume they will be comfortable with it just because you saw them doing it with someone else
- Respect everyone, particularly younger dancers. Consider if it's appropriate to ask someone who looks under 18 to dance. Young people are particularly likely to feel bound by social pressure.

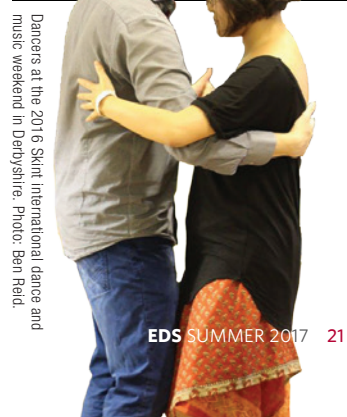
This list isn't exhaustive, but I hope it provides some food for thought. I'm pleased to hear that some events are already introducing initiatives to support their dancers, and just recently a website – inclusion.folkdancing.co.uk – was set up to share ideas on the subject. I'm optimistic that by working together to dance with respect, we can make folk dances a safe and enjoyable space for everyone.

Gender-free calling

Calling without reference to a dancer's gender: for example you might say "the first line" instead of "the men's line". The idea is to allow dancers to dance with whomever they like, wherever they like. In some dances you come to realise that they didn't really need two roles in the first place. In styles such as American contra, which do have two defined dance 'roles', there have been moves to change the role names, with jets/ rubies, larks/ravens or lead/ follow as some alternatives.



Sign used at Coventry Zesty Playford dances to encourage respect for other dancers.



Dancers at the 2016 Skirt International dance and music weekend in Derbyshire. Photo: Ben Reid.