

Statement on Role Terms for Pinewoods Scottish Sessions

The Executive Committee of the Boston Branch published an aspirational statement on gender-neutral instructions for Scottish Country dances in Autumn of 2023.

The 2024 co-chairs enthusiastically support this statement of intent. We note that Pinewoods Scottish Sessions has provided opportunities for dancers, teachers, and MCs to explore this topic for several years now, and we trust it will continue to do so. Many MCs in recent years have thoughtfully presented a variety of role names and approaches to briefing dances with an intentional absence of role names. We have hosted several open discussions around both the Whys and Hows of potential changes to our terminology.

The co-chairs and the Teaching and Music Committee have asked our teachers and MCs to consider in advance what language they will use for Scottish Sessions. We have not asked them to use any particular language, but to be prepared and intentional about their choices. Teachers and MCs will be expected to introduce dancers to the language they will be using at the beginning of their programme and offer reminders as needed.

Dancers can expect to encounter a variety of approaches to addressing roles throughout the session. We hope that dancers who have previously felt excluded by strict adherence to gendered terminology will feel welcome as the community as a whole continues to actively explore alternatives. We understand that novelty and uncertainty poses new challenges to experienced dancers. This variety is intended to mitigate these challenges while pursuing our commitment to improved inclusivity.

We hope that Pinewoods Scottish Sessions will continue to serve as a meeting-place where dancers and teachers from a wide variety of backgrounds and experience can collaborate to help guide our community to a future that lives up to the Society's Code of Conduct that we welcome "all dancers and music lovers, regardless of gender/gender identity, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance, religion, or employment status".

Marc and Keira Hartstein
Scottish Sessions Co-chairs, 2024

Aspirational Statement on Gender-neutral Instructions for Scottish Country Dances

Context

Over the last few years, the teachers and dancers of Boston Branch of the RSCDS have been experimenting with the use of gender-neutral terms when teaching or briefing Scottish country dances. The impetus for such a change comes from the greater awareness of gender as a fluid category, which, when reduced to a rigid binary (man/woman), leaves many people feeling excluded and unseen.

English-speaking cultures have been migrating to gender-neutral terms for several decades—mail carrier vs. postman; Chair vs. Chairwoman or Chairman. In practice, dancers often dance on “opposite” sides by choice or necessity, and many enjoy doing so. So, gendered terms are often inaccurate even where they are accepted as the norm. Nonetheless, changing the terms for calling a Scottish country dance is a challenge for teachers and dancers who have used gendered terms for decades, and many dance instructions continue to be published using “traditional terminology.”

Some dance communities have embraced alternate systems; many contra-dancers now prefer Larks and Robins, for example, and these terms are now used by teachers and MCs in Scottish country dance settings. Based on comments in the Pinewoods Camper Evaluations and recent discussions among teachers hosted by the Teaching and Music Committee, “positional terms” without a gendered addition (such as first corners, first couple, and first diagonal) are also gaining acceptance. Over time, perhaps a particular system will emerge as the preferred alternative.

Statement of support

Taking all this into account, the Executive Committee of the Boston Branch wishes to share the following “aspirational statement” with our community for comment and further creative consideration:

Members of our community have let us know that traditional, gendered terminology for dance instructions (First Man, First Woman) imposes on their dancing activities rigid categories that negatively affect aspects of their daily lives. The Boston Branch of the RSCDS (and the SCD community at large) aspires to be an open, welcoming, and inclusive organization. The updated RSCDS Code of Conduct asserts that the global Society welcomes “all dancers and music lovers, regardless of gender/gender identity, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance, religion or employment status”(rscds.org/safer-spaces). We honor and respect all those who were trained using gendered terminology, and we will not impose any particular practice on teachers and MCs. At the same time, we honor the reality of gender fluidity and the freedom of gender expression. In this spirit, we encourage the generous and open-minded exploration of alternatives to gendered terms, and we support efforts to enable dancers, teachers, and MCs to become more adept in and comfortable with their use. We hope that, over time, one form of gender-neutral terms will emerge as the most accepted alternative and become familiar and accessible to all.

The Executive Committee, RSCDS, Boston Branch
To be added to The Boston Branch Policies and Practices, 2023