

“Okay, I need you girls to give me some serious volume here. And by the way, I can call you ‘girls’ because Hillary called herself one on TV a few nights ago!”



Thus spoke the charming and witty choir director to his sopranos and altos last Sunday during rehearsal for the morning worship service. I, being one of the ‘girls’ in question – a second soprano, to be precise – and given to lively banter with said amiable choir director, piped up with the following response:

“When I heard Hillary use the word ‘girl’ the other night, my first thought was, ‘Thank God it’s back!’”

The choir director chuckled in agreement. But a couple of sopranos by my side were not pleased. They were, in fact, shocked and appalled at my brazen enthusiasm for the antiquated, antifeminist term “girl.” An argument ensued (a gentle argument – we were in church, after all) during which my fellow sopranos gave me a good (yet gentle) talking to.

“Obviously, you’ve never worked in an office run by men,” one of them told me. “Where it’s always ‘the men and the girls,’ and they expect you to make the coffee every morning....” “It’s so demeaning!” said the other soprano, eyes flashing. “A grown up, accomplished woman should never refer to herself, or let anyone else refer to her, as a girl.”

“I thought it was cute,” ventured the (courageous) choir director, referring to Hillary’s statement at the recent AFL-CIO debate, where she said something like, “If you want a winner who knows how to take on the right wing, I’m your girl!” I agreed with him whole-heartedly, but decided that saying so probably wouldn’t help my case. If my fellow sopranos didn’t like “girl,” they probably wouldn’t like “cute,” either.

How could I make my case? How could I explain why I liked Hillary’s use of the word ‘girl’? It wasn’t enough to say what I was really thinking – that the word just felt good and sounded right, like the voice of an old friend who’s been away too long... that it was casual and playful and spunky... that it made Hillary seem casual and playful and spunky. Almost like a... girl.

I could say that, indeed, I’d worked in offices run by men. I’ve also worked in offices run by women. There wasn’t much difference. Yes, I’ve made my share of coffee, but I’ve had coffee made for me, too. The truth is, I’ve just never felt like a victim of sexism.

The more I thought about it, the more it seemed like a generational disagreement we were having. The sopranos in question were closer to my mom’s age than to mine, and may very well have been victims of sexism and/or active feminists in the trenches. I came of age in the post-feminist era, when so much of the hard work for sexual equality had already been done. I’m ashamed to say I probably take things for granted that women once had to fight for tooth and nail or simply suffer without. I need to be more mindful of their sacrifices, and more grateful, but isn’t it a sign of how far we’ve come that such issues are hardly even on my radar?

Well, I thought so. But my simple “generation gap” explanation started to crumble when I began researching the topic online. Apparently, Hillary’s “I’m your girl” statement made waves way beyond our choir room and out into the ever-turbulent blogosphere, where it’s been labeled a “gaffe,” a “political masterstroke,” and everything in between.

A young woman named Cara on Feministing.com was enraged that a 59-year-old senator and presidential candidate would refer to herself as a girl.

“I bring up her age not to make her sound ‘old’ – I’m 23, and I bristle at being called a ‘girl’ as much as any 23-year-old man bristles at being called a ‘boy.’ I resent the cultural phenomenon of infantilizing women, as well as the social practice for men to be called men the moment they turn 18, while women have to wait at least until they’re 30 to be regularly called a woman, and

even then are encouraged to put off the change as long as possible.”

So much for my theory that younger women don't worry too much about feminist issues because they've never had to. Here was someone barely out of her teens who resented being called a girl for reasons that sounded straight out of the sixties. And her feelings were shared by plenty of other bloggers who ran the gamut, age-wise. Clearly, the feminist movement is alive and well and thriving in cyberspace.

But there were some other opinions out there, too, and from unexpected sources. Geraldine Ferraro, the Democratic candidate for vice-president in 1984, told the AP that Hillary's avowal of girlhood was a moment she loved in the debate. When female politicians hang out, they often call themselves “the girls,” Ferraro said.

“I think it's good and healthy. She's comfortable with herself and with the campaign. I think we are in a different time, where we don't have to kill ourselves to show we are as good as men.”

Hear hear, Gerrie! My sentiments, exactly. At age 72, Ferraro obviously remembers a time when we did have to “kill ourselves” to compete with men... when being as good as a man meant being like a man. If even Geraldine Ferraro can let her guard down, then surely it's okay for the rest of us, right?

Can't we women – within certain limits, of course – finally enjoy being girls again?

I wanted to talk to someone who, I suspected, had never stopped; so I called – you guessed it – my mother. As you may remember from my last column, Mom has no use for Hillary politically, but when asked about the “I'm your girl” episode, she had nothing but kudos for Ms. Clinton.

I asked Mom if she found the term “girl” demeaning. “Demeaning?” she asked, amused by the very question. “I take it as a high compliment!”

She went on to explain that she, of course, had grown up with two brothers, and was always expected to perform to the best of her ability, just as the boys were. There was never much hoo-hah made about her being “a girl,” though she did attend a “girls' school,” (a “women's college,” as we now call them) where she excelled, as was expected. Later, right out of college in the early 60s, Mom went to work as a computer programmer for IBM. She was one of the first women to do so, and was treated to the same pay and benefits as her male colleagues. It would never have occurred to her to expect – or accept – less. Eventually, she stopped working and had four children. Once those children were in middle school, she went back to work as an office manager on a part-time basis. Again, she was treated fairly, considering the work and her time commitment to it. Working part-time was her choice; it was the right thing for her family and for her. She understood what so many women no longer seem to – that you can't have it all, that life is full of trade-offs. That was fine with her. And if, from time to time, one of the guys at the office called her a “girl,” I'm sure that was more than fine. Mom likes men, and she likes that they like her. It's a mutual affair; nobody's oppressing anybody, I assure you. Despite her fondness for the male/female dynamic (or maybe because of it?) she never fails to run a tight ship. There was never any doubt in that mostly-male office, and certainly not in our house, about who was in charge.

Maybe my mom's just been lucky in dodging the sexism bullet. Or maybe she's made her own luck. The victim mentality is simply not part of her make-up. But there is not, nor has there ever been, anything “mannish” about her, either. Whether at home or in the work place, my mother – a flirtatious southern beauty with a razor-sharp wit and a zillion skills – has always proven herself the epitome of competence... while remaining very much “a girl.” Yes, she knows all about trade-offs, but trading off her femininity for respect, as if the two were somehow

mutually exclusive? The thought would never have entered her mind.
Maybe that's why it's never entered mine. After all, I'm her girl.