

Girls Can't Do That!
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The first woman to be named conductor of a major US symphony orchestra shares that when she arrived at her introductory concert with her father, she was irritated her mother insisted she wear a dress. But when young Leonard Bernstein addressed the audience of children, she felt like the Mahler they would hear was just for them. After the applause, she turned to her father and said, "I want to do that. I want to be a conductor."

The next day her father brought home a long narrow wooden box filled with batons! Upon hearing this, tears began to flow as I thought, Daddy would have done that! Since we weren't near a city, I doubt that he could have found so many batons but he would have tried. Growing up, I was never told that I couldn't do something because I was a girl.

Dad included me in hammering nails, target practice with my brother's BB gun, going up on the roof, and crawling on my hands and knees on the rocks in the crawl space under the house. My brother and I did dishes. Dad cooked in the kitchen, not just on the grill. Our lived experiences were not dictated by norms.

It wasn't until I was on my own that I learned I didn't belong. While some men at music education meetings didn't mind my being there, others glared. The only woman in the room, they thought I should only be teaching young children. How dare I conduct "real" music at the high school level? How dare I take a man's job at a junior college?

Employing my skill set at a large city church angered some of the influential men when my job description changed as frequently as did the needs. Recognizing my worth, our senior pastor made use of my talents. He called me his choreographer. On the Sunday morning he called with severe laryngitis, he only trusted me to deliver his sermon.

As the music director for a city musical, everything was going well until it was time to bring in the 23 piece orchestra. The lead trumpet player was livid that I was on the podium. "How dare you come in here with your long gowns and dangling earrings with your baton!"

Today, some men want to take us back decades to a time where women "knew their place, didn't make waves, and did what they were told." Threatened by strong, smart, educated, confident women, they don't want to lose power. My strong grandmothers, my parents, and the women who were my mentors created a safe space where I was encouraged and expected to blossom and grow into the person I am. I invite others to stand on my shoulders, just like that successful conductor whose father bought her batons as a little girl. One day, I hope that our society gets beyond having to say, "She is the first."

