Is it wrong to be a 'chivalrous' woman? [1]

Dear Alice,
I have a rather awkward problem. (Or, at least it seems awkward to me!) I'm an eighteen year old woman and I make it a point to be courteous to everyone when I'm out in public. Recently, however, I began to notice something rather strange. Earlier this week, I held the door open for a man who absolutely refused to walk through. He said something along the lines of, "The hair on the back of my neck would stand up for years? please go through first."

This isn't the first time it happened? in fact, it seems to be happening more and more and only with men. My friends have a habit of jokingly calling me ?macho,? and say that men are afraid of me because I don't act very feminine. As a woman, I do fancy myself as good looking and perhaps a little assertive, but why does it seem like men don't appreciate courteous gestures like opening doors or pulling out chairs? It's starting to make me feel unattractive.

Do I have to start acting like a stereotypical girl, or is it okay to be courteous to everyone? men included? Any input you have would be a great relief!

Sincerely,
Nio

Answer

Dear Nio,

You go ahead and hold open that door! This is an important issue, especially in modern times. Gender roles are shared beliefs that apply to individuals on the basis of their socially-identified sex. Gender roles have evolved into social norms, often describing what men and women "should" do or what is considered admirable or attractive for their sex. These stereotypes have even gone as far as to suggest what is feminine and what is masculine. Gender roles even shape social norms around courteous behaviors, such as holding open doors. These characteristics, however, are not always viewed as positively when performed by members of the "unexpected" gender.

The roots of chivalry and its association with masculinity are long-standing. Many of these ideas come from the eroding expectation that men are dominant over women. Gender stereotypes suggest that women ought to be communal, friendly, unselfish, concerned with others, and emotionally expressive. Men are thought to be masterful, assertive, competitive, and dominant. This male dominance suggests protectiveness and politeness toward women: men are expected, not only to protect women from dangers, but also to deliver acts of
courtesy, such as helping them put on their coats. With cultural roots in medieval codes of chivalry, such norms have survived in common paternalistic beliefs and behaviors.

The belief that men should be the ones performing courteous behaviors is the reason for the reaction you are getting. However, it is important to note that assumptions of male dominance are largely being challenged and discounted. Even the idea of gender roles is often refuted in liberal segments of society. However, it is important to remember that not every segment of society has subscribed to this. Thanks to longstanding gender roles, some people may still feel you are behaving in a "masculine" way. This likely explains why a man may feel less masculine if he is not the one carrying out his "expected" gender role of holding the door for a woman.

The bottom line is this: being nice, helpful, and courteous is just that. There's no association with masculinity or femininity, and it seems like in your case, it purely comes from a place of wanting to help people out rather than wanting to assert dominance. You should do what feels good to you! Continue to act as you please. Furthermore, even though in the past it was common and expected for women to perhaps be less bold or assertive, recent research shows that intelligence and assertiveness, things considered masculine in the past, is actually attractive. So go ahead and be assertive. And above all, continue being yourself!

Alice!
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