I was recently sitting in my women and gender class, and one of the questions posed to us was, “When did you recognize your gender?” I paused, trying to think back on the exact moment or place where I knew I was different; where I knew that I was opposite of man and that there were a list of stereotypes and expectations that were assigned to me. I struggled answering this for myself — in many ways I defied the stereotypes. My closest friends are men, I am outspoken, and I never felt like I could not do something a man could do. As I continued to take a journey down the timeline of my life, I would remember little things, like being told to cross my legs or that my boisterous laugh was too manly. I defined what a woman was by the strong women who came before me, such as Rosa Parks or Madonna.

Although being a woman has always been a salient part of my identity, there has never been a time where I internalized the implications of that identity more than during my time in graduate school. I will never forget the day that my fellow peers and myself experienced our “council bid day,” where the three of us would discover what council we would be advising for the next year. With unbridled anticipation, I ripped open my envelope and written in big, bold letters — IFC. In the midst of my excitement, there was one comment that stuck out to me; someone saw that I would be advising IFC and said, “Good luck.”

It was from that point on I had the most rewarding year of my life, advising some of the most inspiring, passionate, innovative students I have ever had the pleasure of knowing. Yet, I would be doing myself and any other woman who advises an IFC a disservice if I did not acknowledge that it came with its own unique set of challenges — and those challenges oftentimes hit me at my core. Throughout my year being a woman IFC advisor, there were three major lessons I learned about myself that I would not have learned any other way.

**Finding Voice in a Male Dominated Space**

When I think about Women’s History Month, I often find myself coming back to the power of voice. When I think of “strong women,” I think of those who made waves in the oceans of male dominated spaces, fearlessly speaking their truth into the world. This was something I had to learn how to do. Typically, I am known to speak up, but I recognized I was uncomfortable at times because I subconsciously understood I was in a space where my opinion may not be valued. I would question how I could get my point across without coming off as “emotional” or “bossy.” As a woman advising men, I felt there would have to be certain tones and phrases I had to use to gain legitimacy, and that struggle was an ongoing battle. Never have I felt the weight of my
identities and how they played into a larger environment more than when I would be in a delegation room, and navigating that experience proved to transformative. I learned to not allow myself to be spoken over; this first began by recognizing that I was being spoken over. I quickly found I first needed to value my voice and unapologetically defend it. It is uncomfortable to say, “I was speaking, and what I am saying is important,” and it is also hard to not take their disregard personally. But by first legitimizing myself and then meeting my students with firm empathy, I found my voice in a place I never thought I could.

I am Not “One of the Boys” and That is How it Should Be
Digging deeper into what it means to be a boss woman in a male dominated space, a common theme I have found through talking with colleagues who also work with IFC is that it is really hard to not try to be “one of the boys” in order be liked. So often, we as women try to conform to the culture surrounding us, and many times that includes compromising our own voice, values, and power to fit in. It was an interesting dynamic as a graduate advisor — being not too far removed from their age could easily allow me to be “friendzoned” and therefore feel validated. But that would be doing a disservice to me and to my students I worked with. I needed to reconcile in myself that although I may not always be liked, I know I always have their wellbeing in mind.

Saying “Thank You” Instead of “Sorry”
Finally, through advising IFC, I learned how socialized I was into saying “sorry” for things that did not warrant it. I found myself saying it when tensions arose, and I quickly had to learn that by saying “sorry” when no harm was done only enhances the gender barrier in certain situations and interactions. I learned if no harm had been done, I would instead say “thank you.” For example, instead of saying, “I am sorry for being late,” I would phrase it as, “Thank you for your patience while I made my way over here.” I found this technique helped to level the playing field, and it allowed me to gain confidence and challenge my own gender socialization, and that is not something I would have learned without having advised fraternity men.

So, what does it mean to be a Boss Woman? I’m still figuring it out. But through trial and error, as well as finding the confidence to validate my own worth, I was able to grow into the woman I am today all thanks to the lessons I have learned from advising men. Although my definition is evolving, I find being a Boss Woman means having the confidence to connect, to relate, to meet those where they are, and to find the power in their voice. To be a woman leader comes with its own challenges, especially when operating in male dominated spaces. Learning that being a leader is not bossy, that being assertive is not being aggressive, and that being passionate is not simply being emotional were all lessons I learned by advising the IFC executive board, and I am a better leader, advisor, and woman for it. I challenge all women advisors of IFC, especially the
graduate advisors, to lean in and challenge the system. You all will be better because of it.

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McKenzie Sauer is a second year graduate student at Ball State University, where she is a graduate assistant for fraternity/sorority life. Come May, McKenzie will be making the transition and will be working as the new coordinator for fraternity and sorority life programs at the University of Iowa. Throughout her time at Ball State, she has worn many hats, including advising the IFC executive board. She looks forward to continuing to support fraternity/sorority life communities throughout her career and is excited for what this next chapter has to offer.