

Last week, I had one of the most profound moments of my life - I sat a few feet away from Gloria Steinem as she spoke about women's equality, how far we've come, and how far there's still to go. I subsequently had the opportunity to take her old, withering yet determined hand in my younger, yet less sure and slightly shaky one and tell her how much she meant to me. Sitting in that room, surrounded by hundreds of women goddesses, I had never felt more profoundly connected to so many women, and at the same time been felt more sure that I had agency in the world and that I could use this agency to be impactful in profound ways in the world.

How did I get here? What made meeting Gloria so impactful? How does a young, pretty privileged girl become a feminist?

I was a very precocious child and I got stupendously lucky because I found what I want to do when I was 11 years old. I knew this was going to be my life the first time I wrote a piece of code to get my Harry Potter fansite online. The large amounts of dopamine that flowed through my brain as I learnt the concept of classes and objects and functions, and pushed code onto the server from the command line made that moment a memorable one even after all these years. But that moment is not what our story is about. This story takes place a few months ago, on a balmy San Francisco day.

My cofounder and I were head first into launching our product - we had just spent months of coffee fueled late nights getting to launch time. I had written code non-stop

for the last few months, while he had travelled all over the bay area to talk to customers, get their feedback and ensure they were falling in love with our product. It was one of the most exciting phases of my life - we talked about our product non-stop, we felt a strong sense of mission, like we were fellow warriors in the trenches alongside you fighting for the same mission. We were invincible.

We launched our product to great applause and then it was time to raise money. This is where things got tricky. See the marvelous thing about writing code is that code doesn't care about who writes it - you can be an old wrinkly man, a young video game obsessed brunette, or a dog that loves wagging his tail, or even a blonde Indian girl who loves fashion - as long as your logic is sound, it will work. It's very pure and mathematical in its execution. The problem with raising money is it introduces humans into the mixture. And humans by definition are not logical people, as much as we aspire to be. The homo economicus is a mythical creature.

When we went to raise money, our code wasn't judged simply by how well it performed or by how many customers loved us - who wrote the code became a massive factor. This became clear to me for the first time when my co-founder and I walked into our first VCs office - very nervous but confident in our abilities to close the deal. Imagine me - in a black, full sleeve dress, with my glasses on, a handbag and my laptop; and my co-founder - a jewish guy, with a full beard in a black hoodie and jeans. We walk in to the VCs office, are greeted by a friendly receptionist and shown a room. A couple

minutes later, a middle aged, slightly stocky man in a navy hoodie and jeans walks in. We exchange pleasantries and he has a very warm, welcoming smile. He makes a joke and tells me about the company he exited and how roller-coaster like the process was. I feel calmer, this guy is one of us, he understands us and I feel ready to shine. We dive right into the metrics of our startup and immediately notice two things - he is in “business mode” now and suddenly in his mind I have disappeared. All his questions are directed to my cofounder, specially the technical ones.

My co-founder is amazing, but let’s face it he knows nothing about programming or building a technical solution - he’s a bizdev guy. He can’t answer questions about our code any more than I can tell you what our quarterly earnings are going to look like. Yet in this VCs mind there seems to be no doubt that of course it is my cofounder who built the product, who is an authority on product decisions. It doesn’t even occur to him for a second that the blonde girl in the black dress might be the brains of the operation. I am very taken aback, but also very enthusiastic about sharing why we built our product the way we did, so I interject and answer his questions even when they’re aimed at my cofounder.

Sometimes he cuts me off halfway, other times he listens patronizingly, and then when I’m done, looks to my cofounder as if to say - is she right? what is the real answer?

My cofounder notices this happening and points out to the VC that I'm the technical one so the VC should ask me about our stack. And so the VC says "really? But you just.. don't look like a programmer. I would never believe it. You built this all on your own?"

And there you have it. The sentence that has followed me around all of my 20s. The sentence that has made me feel like I don't belong, like somehow I'm taking up space where I'm not supposed to, like my nerdiness and my ability to program is somehow diminished and lesser than those of my male peers. It's the sentiment I have tried to reconcile with all of my life. It's the reason we drive girls away from Computer Science majors across the country, it is the reason we don't yet have our female Steve Jobs.

Girls, specially feminine girls still have no place in the tech world. There is no overt sign that says "If you like dresses keep out." But the message is conveyed in many, many small acts like this one. It tells girls that they must choose between their femininity and their smarts. That they can't possibly be both. That when they nerd out, many men will respond with phrases like "you look so sensual when you talk about machine learning". That their brains will not be taken as seriously just because they wear a black dress and not a black hoodie.

And if even this fairly evolved, Ivy League educated VC, in one of the most progressive cities in the world can't fathom for a moment that I might be capable of wearing a dress and building our entire infrastructure at the same time - there is still a long way to go.

Like Gloria said, there is still so much work left to be done. And sitting across from her last week, listening to her tell her own stories of outrageous acts and everyday rebellions, I believed that I too can change things for my fellow female nerds, and that I can make it my life's mission to normalize femininity and nerdiness so no other girl after me believes that the choice between her femininity and her brain is a binary one. That encompassing one makes her less of the other. I cannot wait to get started!