

The f-word

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Last week, the NAACP "buried" the n-word, a symbolic gesture to encourage folks everywhere to stop using it.

I wish they'd take the f-word with them - the use of "female" as a noun.

If you're tired of all things PC, you can stop reading here.

As one co-worker pointed out, there's a whole list of things I'd prefer not to be called that rank higher than "a female," but truthfully, that one just irks me. I have to credit one of my grad-school professors for drawing my attention to the word's skewed usage. Though the men in her class railed behind her back, calling her that other f-word (a feminist), my conscience was pricked.

Harmless as it may appear, the use of the word "female" as a noun is anything but that to me. Aside from professional context, such as scientific classification, it's dehumanizing. When a man refers to a woman as a female, I can literally hear her being stripped of every quality that makes her a flesh-and-blood person.

And I take it personally. When you call me "a female" instead of a woman, I am no longer a soprano in the choir, a daughter, a sister, a girlfriend, a princess in God's royal priesthood or even a shrew.

Along with objectifying portrayals of women (think music videos), the term turns women into sexual objects, said Huberta Jackson-Lowman, an associate professor of psychology at Florida A&M.

"When referred to as 'females,' women then become objects of pleasure rather than people with talents," she said.

I once asked a friend why he referred to a classmate as a female and was disturbed by his response. He'd just upgraded them from "chicks" and thought "woman" sounded too over 50. "Sister" was reserved for black women, he said, and his future wife would be a "lady." I understand the subjectivity of the last term, but it sounded as if he believed there are levels a woman must reach to earn a label of common respect.

Jackson-Lowman, who is currently conducting research related to the topic, says this objectification "means we aren't partners of equal status." The use of the pejorative "isn't too different from the use of the b-word. It's happening side-by-side in everyday conversation."

I believe the modern application of the term is rooted in hip-hop. The genre shouldn't be a scapegoat for society's ills, but it is far-reaching and influential. Like any other instrument of cultural influence, hip-hop, however reluctantly, shares responsibility for shaping attitudes.

My clearest memory of the f-word's out-of-context usage is from "Beautiful Skin," a Goodie Mob anthem that I pump in moments of self-assuredness. The group's bass-heavy love letter ". . . out of respect to women, period" heralds the beauty, brains and intellect of women, but bombs when group member T-Mo invokes the help of God while "looking for the right female."

Female what? I snap. Female cow?

I'm particularly disturbed to hear the f-word from the mouths of other women - e.g., "I would have called him, but I was afraid a female might answer the phone." Not his mama, not his girlfriend, not anything remotely human, just something capable of producing eggs and bearing offspring.

I can't get into the feminist politics of it, but it seems to me that women are again trying to square up with men, playing by their rules and using their terminology instead of creating our own.

As a writer, I fundamentally believe in the power of words. Some may find my campaign against the f-word this argument is petty when women are still grappling with the commonplace b's-and-h's. Much to the chagrin of the male

friends I lecture when they speak out of turn, I believe that using the f-word in the pejorative sense is a crack in the foundation of respect for women.

It's a Stop. Think. thing. Mothers, sisters and daughters deserve better. Once we reach womanhood, we are capable of holding life in our bodies, nourishing it as it grows in infancy. Women are co-workers, classmates. We are critical thinkers, caregivers and lovers. Every woman may not be a princess, but each one is much more than just her gender. Call us by our name.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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