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The word “feminism” has been poisoned, but no replacement exists. Lisbeth Darsh asks why.



Column

By Lisbeth Darsh

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Michael Brian

“One question liberal feminists would do well to ask themselves is why most American women today reject the label ‘feminist.’” —Sarah Palin

If “feminist” is such a tainted word, what word do we use now?

“I think feminist has been given a bad name. ... I think any label is bad. ... I’m more than a label. I don’t want to be labeled

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anything." Governor Nikki Haley (R-South Carolina) said this in 2012, and who could disagree with her? Many people don't like labels, and "feminist" has turned into what Haley calls a "hard word." Numerous people simply don't want to use it.

But if equality of the sexes has not been achieved, we still need a word to describe "a person who advocates equal rights for women." What do we call those people who don't think women should take a back seat, a second place or a lower rung on the ladder because we have vaginas and breasts? What word should replace "feminist"?

I went to Thesaurus.com and other sites for a synonym for "feminist" and repeatedly received this answer: "No results found." How can a word that's been in use since 1895 not have a synonym? It's just a derivative of the French word "feminisme," yet no other word is considered close in meaning. We had only one word, and now it's sullied. As Sarah Palin said, "One question liberal feminists would do well to ask themselves is why most American women today reject the label 'feminist.'"



David Brewer

"I don't subscribe to patriarchy, and I don't think it should be substituted with matriarchy. I think it's a question of equitable access, and opening doors to all sorts of things." —Toni Morrison

What to do? Should we work on getting the stain out of our linguistic dress? Can we cleanse the term? After all, this is a word that morphed over 30 years from a 1974 Badge of Honor to a 2014 Mark of Anger. It's a term so capable of stirring emotion that Pat Robertson at the 1992 GOP Convention said, "The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians."

Robertson might be a whack job, but that's some strong language, and The Little Noun That Could seems to have turned into The Little Noun That Didn't Know When to Shut Up.

Even Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison (whom some would regard as a liberal) isn't a fan of her work being labeled "feminist." Responding to the question "Why distance oneself from feminism?" posed by *Salon* magazine in 1998, Morrison said, "In order to be free as I possibly can, in my own imagination, I can't take positions that are closed. ... I don't subscribe to patriarchy, and I don't think it should be substituted with matriarchy. I think it's a question of equitable access, and opening doors to all sorts of things."

When Rush Limbaugh started bellowing about "feminazis" in 2004, it was probably the last nail in the feminist coffin for many people. Homicide, witchcraft and Nazis? Magic trifecta. No one wants to join that club, except the sort of people you steer your cart away from in the supermarket.

No wonder there's no synonym for "feminist." Our wars of political rhetoric would just burn it down, too. This is why we can't have nice things.

Is this just a case of women again being told what's best for them? Some men don't like the word, so their women don't like the word. Maybe things have not turned out exactly how Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton imagined when they were marching around in long dresses and getting arrested and attacked while procuring women's right to vote in America.

Or maybe things turned out better than those suffragettes of long ago imagined. Much of Western society now assumes men and women should have equal rights. The issue is no longer up for debate, so perhaps we don't need a word that describes supporters for the concept. Even if Michele Bachmann says Americans "aren't ready" for a female president, others would argue it's time for the "Mission Accomplished" banner to be hung on the equal rights debate.



Shaun Cleary

CrossFit women often compete head-to-head with male athletes, but many still reject the word “feminist.”

But even if that is true, it feels like a hollow victory, as if equality of rights for women is considered a done deal and no one should talk about the numerous gender issues we still have, such as a [rape culture](#) that devalues women and emboldens young men to commit crimes such as the [Steubenville rape](#) and numerous other incidents across America. If equality of rights really exists, why do we have a [gender pay gap](#) in numerous [countries](#), wherein women are paid less for the same work as men?

And if everything is OK in the world, why are the female images in stock photos such [old-fashioned stereotypes](#), and why do toy companies market to little girls with products that support the idea that women are [here to serve and care](#), not engineer and lead? Unfortunately, those seemingly innocent choices and a [lack of female role models](#) can later affect education levels, salary and career trajectory for these same girls.

If you really stop and look, you might think, “Wow, gender issues are still everywhere.”

Gendercide is a reality in China and India and other nations. Girls are so devalued in some countries that a mother will poison her own newborn daughter rather than burden her family with a child who will earn lesser wages than a boy and cost the family money in a dowry. Think about that for

a moment: Mothers would rather kill newborn daughters than raise them. Horrifying, right? Yet it’s an accepted act in parts of our world.

These realizations might stir the urge in you to fight for true equality of women everywhere rather than settle for current gains. They might make you want to be a ... a what?

There is no term to replace “feminist.” No results found.



About the Author

Lisbeth Darsh is a writer and editor for CrossFit. She also blogs regularly at [Wordswithlisbeth.com](#).