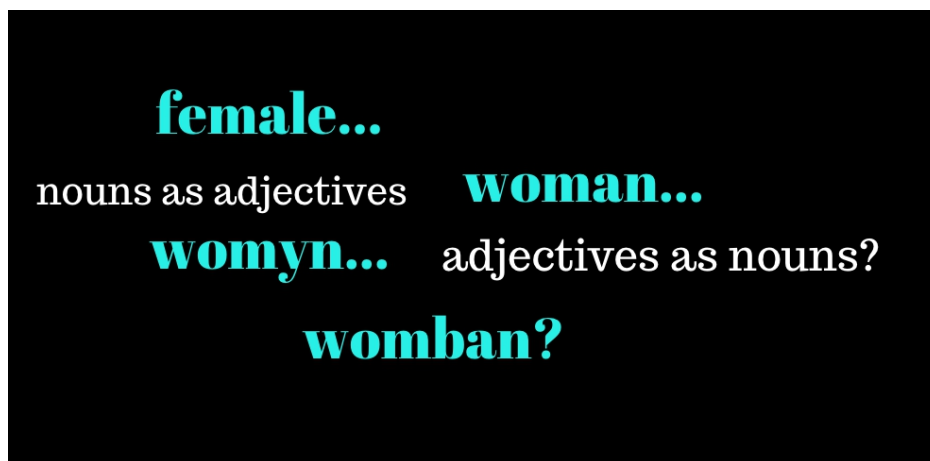


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Country: Global

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Last week, I came across a BuzzFeed [listicle](#) explaining why you should stop referring to women as ‘females’. Published all the way back in 2014, it gives six simple reasons for this:

1. ‘Female’ refers to a sex of any species, while ‘woman’ refers to human females;
2. Reducing women to their reproductive abilities is dehumanising and excludes women who cannot reproduce, trans and gender non-conforming people;
3. It is not widely acceptable to refer to men as ‘males’;
4. ‘Female’ is often used in a pejorative sense – to insult or belittle;
5. ‘Female’ is an adjective. “When you use “female” as a noun, the subject that you’re referring to is erased”;
6. The word you are looking for when you say ‘female’ exists. It’s ‘woman’.

Today, 2014 seems like distant history. A lot has changed since then. Obama had been replaced by an orange. [Chinese](#) and [Chechen](#) authorities are concentrating 'undesirable' citizens in camps on an industrial scale. The Brexit referendum actually happened. Japan [resumed](#) commercial whaling, even though the climate emergency shows no signs of going away. The list goes on and on.

But not all that happened was bad news. For one, the #metoo movement has precipitated positive changes and greater sensitivity towards women's rights in

[some](#) countries around the world. Perhaps, as with any global rights movement, it produced a backlash in many

[other places](#). What is more worrying is that a lot of this progress for cis women is still transphobic and exclusionary of non-binary people. As trans people keep

[saying](#), such exclusionary discourse has painful real-life consequences.

During Pride month, this needs to have more visibility.

Recently, I wrote an [op-ed](#) about this problem in relation to British media. Now, I wonder – how can journalists stop this vicious cycle? How can we write about gender equality in a way that **in**

cludes trans, non-binary and gender-queer people, while staying grammatically correct?

Woman. Womyn. ...Womxn?

The BuzzFeed article above seems to set one thing straight – the only noun you should ever use to describe woman-presenting people as a whole is ‘woman/women’.

But, some radical feminists have long advocated using ‘womyn’ or ‘wombyn’ in order to “remove the dick” from ‘woMAN’. While not inherently transphobic, these words have been frequently used to exclude trans women and non-binary people. As Luna Merbruja – a US writer, activist and trans woman – [points out](#), ‘womyn’ is often used to describe women born as women. More explicitly, ‘WOMByn’ denotes a “woman with a womb”. Merbruja adds,

“This hyper-focus on a womb makes many trans and cis women uncomfortable...A woman is forced to believe her duty in life is to bear children to a man is in the same vein that a trans woman who can’t birth a child is not a true woman.”

A more [inclusive alternative](#) is the more recent ‘womxn’. Personally, this is my term of preference. But, womxn is yet to gain widespread recognition and might not be grammatically correct in the strictest sense for now. This is in contrast to ‘womyn’, which had already made it into [the Merriam-Webster](#).

Woman as Adjective

When it comes to adjectives things get even trickier. Using ‘female’ as an adjective, for example “a female doctor”, is grammatically correct. But, is it *inclusive*?

First things first, you should always consider whether it is necessary to specify the person’s gender in the first place. Mignon Foggarty – the creator of Grammar Girl, included by the Writers Digest in their [101 Best Websites for Writers](#) guide – [argues](#) that in many cases it is simply inappropriate to do so.

“Sometimes it’s sexist to point out people’s sex because doing so implies that they aren’t in their proper role. For example, saying someone is a male nurse or a female doctor wrongly implies that it’s so unusual for men to be nurses or so unusual for women to be doctors that you have to make a big deal out of it.”

Of course, in other cases gender is worth mentioning. For example, Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir

made history by becoming the first woman prime minister of Iceland and the world's first openly lesbian head of government in 2009. It was important that newspapers around the world did not obscure these aspects of her identity in their reports in order to highlight the various discriminations faced by women and lesbians around the world.

In these cases, should we use 'female' or 'woman'? Personally, I think that 'female' is not only old-fashioned but reduces women to their reproductive capacity in contexts where it plays little to no role. As such, the use of the adjective 'female' to describe women can be seen as exclusionary of trans women because this leads to a certain [conflation of "vaginas with womanhood"](#). Besides, there are many more biological sexes than two [according to science](#). So, using female as an adjective that describes all women might be biologically inaccurate, even if we want to maintain the distinction between 'sex' and 'gender'.

From the point of grammar, however, things are less clear. Mignon Forgarty highlights that there is no unified scholarly opinion on the issue. After checking four different dictionaries, she found that two said that 'woman' can be used as an adjective, another that it is an [appositive](#) noun and the last that it is just a noun. She concludes that using 'woman' as an adjective is questionable at best and should be avoided in favour of 'female'.

"If for some reason the word *female* makes you uncomfortable, you can use *woman* as a noun, saying she is the first woman to be the party's presidential nominee."

Conversely, the New Yorker's grammar tsar Mary Norris rightly [points out](#) that we already use nouns as adjectives.

“nouns morph into adjectives all the time: a ‘manservant’ is a male servant; the ‘autumn equinox’ sounds better than the ‘autumnal equinox.’ The counter-counter-argument, from the feminist point of view, is that ‘female’ has biological overtones and focusses too narrowly on the reproductive system. You would never refer to Cory Booker as ‘a male candidate,’ though you wouldn’t call him ‘a man candidate,’ either. Given that men have been running the country forever, that would be not only irrelevant but redundant.”

That’s precisely the point. English, like all languages, reflects the society that created it. Language is not some static thing. Its rules and conventions morph through time and place.

Right now, there exists at least two hegemonic versions of English – British and North American. Unfortunately, both are structured around the cis-gender hetero white Anglo man and, to a lesser extent, woman. As such, ‘English grammar’ had historically been used as a tool of racist-colonial oppression of minorities in the West, like [African-Americans](#) in the US, and in colonised societies themselves. This legacy lives on in many postcolonial countries, [where](#) ‘correct’ English grammar and pronunciation are perceived as indicators of intelligence.

As Rey Chow the author of [Not Like a Native Speaker](#) emphasises, we need to learn to speak and to listen “*in tongues*” if we want to make the languages we speak more diverse and inclusive. Personally, I am more than happy to sacrifice the arbitrary rules of grammar to this end. Listening to what members of trans, non-binary and other marginalised communities tell us about pronouns, adjectives and nouns *then* changing the way we speak and write accordingly seems like the obvious place to start.

To read more about gender inclusivity in journalism, click [here](#) . To read our take on YouTube's pride branding click [here](#) .