

OpEd

December 6th and violence in the English language

December 6th, 2007

Though it's painful to listen to young people talk—with all the likes, you knows and whatevers they use—their vernacular is an interesting window into our culture's attitudes and sensibilities. Unfortunately, sometimes the view is pretty ugly.

One of the latest phrases to establish itself as a staple in their chatter is “bitchslap.” According to the online Urban Dictionary, the term refers to putting others in their place by slapping them across the face. The use of “bitch” implies the victim of the slap is weaker than the aggressor and therefore not worthy of a full-blown punch. In other words, the way a man might slap a woman, a.k.a. a bitch.

On December 6, 1989, Marc Lepine put 14 female engineering students in their place with a .22-calibre rifle at L'Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal. He had 19 other women on his hit list, women he identified as feminists, ranging from the first woman firefighter in Quebec to a female president of a trade union. He was angry women were moving into what he felt was male territory.

Many people saw the Montreal Massacre as an isolated incident—the inexplicable actions of a depraved individual. Others connected Lepine's murderous contempt to a broader issue. They argued that currents of misogyny, the hatred of women, run through our society and therefore, it is not surprising some men act on it.

The Montreal Massacre was not an isolated incident. It was a bitchslap of unprecedented proportions.

Since 1996, reports indicate at least 26 women have been murdered in our province by partners, friends, relatives and other people known to them. Each year in Canada, 60 women are killed by their partners and thousands more are beaten, sexually assaulted and stalked.

Women are beaten, assaulted and murdered because abusive men think women are weak and inferior. Putting women down and hurting them makes these men feel powerful. When women try to assert independence, abusers quickly punish them. Violence against women is about power and control.

The term bitchslap is a direct reference to violence against women. The creation of the phrase and the casual, often humour-inflected way it is used says something disturbing about our culture. It reveals the acceptance of the belief that it is okay to use violence to impose one's will on others, especially women.

If the popularity of the new word is any indication, today's youth do not seem all that bothered by violence against women or, at the very least, they do not understand it is real.

The silver bullet that will end violence against women is full equality. If we create a world where women and men are thought to be equals, no one will feel it is their right to violently push women back into "their place." Until that is achieved, we need to keep thinking and talking about violence against women. We need to ask ourselves what we can do to prevent it. We need to make sure young people know what happened on December 6, 1989, and why. Maybe then the euphemism bitchslap will be considered offensive instead of funny.

Danielle Finney
Communications Director
Provincial Advisory Council on the Status of Women
709 753 6007