

Taking Women's Names

By Amanda Cahn

In North America, historically women have been expected to change their last names to their husbands' last names when they marry. Although people are beginning to deviate from that norm, legal documents show that around 85% of heterosexual women still change their last names to their husbands'.

Although interviewee Marcia Dobson's second husband John Riker did not actually change his last name to his wife's, he was quite willing. But Dobson was Marcia's first husband's last name, so she didn't want John to have to take that name.

Only one of our interviewees shared a story of a husband changing his last name to his wife's last name. Michael Sinclair (formerly Michael Gerbec) married Leila Sinclair in 2005. They had different last names until 2008. Michael told us,

After three years of marriage, on our anniversary, I went to Brookland Civil Court and waited for eight hours, for a judge to check that I had no criminal record and to stamp my papers and whatnot. But I had to do all kinds of other stuff. We were both schoolteachers at independent schools and we watched so many families where the parents had different last names. And it just didn't sit right with us. I consider myself a feminist and was excited about flipping the norm... It was a move of solidarity with the feminist cause. It was a desire to have the same last name as my wife for practical reasons (hospitals) and because we knew we were going to have kids. I wanted the same last name as my wife and future kids. I didn't feel any pressure to keep my last name, although I certainly had to think about it before I did it. When I had officially changed my last name, people's responses were very interesting.

Both of Michael's parents expressed surprise and disapproval, when they learned that he had changed his last name from Gerbec to Sinclair. Because Michael and Leila lived in Berkeley, known for being a fairly liberal city, Michael assumed that his decision was going to be accepted, but got disdainful responses like "You're on a short leash". Few of his male friends expressed approval, although Michael politically and philosophically aligned with them overall. Despite negative reactions, Michael expressed no regrets. He said that he would recommend it to others as well because, even in Berkeley, patriarchy is more intact than anyone wants to believe. Changing his last name from Gerbec to Sinclair was a way for Michael to express his opinions on gender equality. He described changing his last name as his "big feminist move".

When asked whether or not Michael believed that his choice really helped in intervening in the whole concept of women being erased by marriage, he answered,

In the world that I'm most engaged with, which is with privileged liberal people, their tendency is more for both of the people to keep their original names. Nobody changes their last name or hyphenates. Something about that is forecasting divorce. It's less uniting. At this point, it's pretty old-fashioned for women to always, unquestioningly take their husbands' last names. The intermediate step that most of these folks take where neither person changes their name makes sense. But I think the next big step is for the man to change his last name to his wife's last name. Men aren't going to start getting erased. That's for sure. That isn't a problem that men could legitimately argue: "*Men are*

going to start losing their identities!” At least in my mind, men are still going to have so much power in our society.

Michael described the sound of many hyphenated last names as appalling and to triple hyphenate would be even worse. He also believes that it's confusing when parents have different last names from each other and/or from their children. That's one of the main reasons why he changed his last name from Gerbec to Sinclaire, despite his belief that “because it's so abnormal for men to change their last names, it's pretty hard to do.” Often, men that change their last names are assumed to be trying to escape their pasts, like criminals. It's much easier for a woman to change her last name than for a man to do so. Michael had to post a notice about his name change in the newspaper for two weeks and deal with the social security office, passport office, and many other inconveniences. He acknowledged that any gesture of going against the norm tends to be inconvenient, but that changing his last name was definitely worth it.

Although that was the only case in which a husband took his wife's last name, there were many other different types of cases in which women's last names were taken, like by children.

Interviewee Jennifer Gillis told us,

When I had Maryka [her daughter] I wasn't married and by the time I had her, I wasn't really close with her father. I decided that I wanted her to have my last name, since I didn't know what the future had in store. About four years later I got married to a man other than Maryka's father and because Maryka was already Maryka Gillis, I just decided to keep my name as Jennifer Gillis. My father is a well-known guy in the town, too. He's involved in a lot of community service and has worked and lived in Gloucester his whole life. We have a really big family, so I think the Gillis family is relatively well-known in this town. I think it was a good thing for her, because it gave a lot of people a reference point whenever she said our last name. I definitely like the last name Gillis and was never under any pressure from my husband to change my last name or Maryka's last name when we got married.

Interviewee Rhythm Kenaley-Lundberg originally had only his mother's last name (Kenaley) and told us,

When my mother and father had me, they didn't take my father's last name, because they were rebellious teenagers traveling with the Rainbow Gathering. I think they just had different beliefs from most people. My father's last name is Lyons. I think it's British and my mother's maiden name (Kenaley) is Irish. It was originally McNealy, but when my ancestors came to America, around the time of the potato famine, it was changed to Kenaley at Ellis Island. Because my mother and her partner Dennis Lundberg never got married, he suggested that my mother and I add his name to ours. Lundberg is Swedish and means trees on a hill or forest on a mountain, or something like that. I was pretty young when we added Lundberg, so I didn't really have any say in the decision.

It is more common for a child to take his/her mother's last name as their middle name than as his/her last name. Interviewee Sarah Smith Han told us,

My last name is from my dad and my middle name is my mom's maiden name, which she kept. I have three older sisters and we all have my mom's maiden name as our middle names. My mom has a pretty common maiden name (Smith) so it's not like she was trying to preserve the family name. There are lots of Smith's out there. Rather, she did

not want to give up her own name for my dad's name, which is unique by the way (Han). For my mother, I definitely think it was a feminist choice to both keep her name and have her name passed on through our middle names. My mother discussed having a hyphenated name with my dad, but that didn't end up happening. I don't really think that it's a feminist statement for me or my sisters, but it was for my mother. When my mother signs things for our family, she signs as the Smith Han family.

Although Sarah does not view her middle name as an extension of her last name, she believes that her mother does. Having a different last name from her mother has caused difficulties, with credit card companies, airlines, hospitals, and the like. The problems have been minor though, so Sarah believes that her parents do not have any regrets about their decision. Although Sarah views herself as a feminist, she told us: "I don't think that my name is the way that I want to make my feminist statement." Due to aesthetics, she also said that she would not consider giving her children her last name as a middle name. She views naming practices as a minute issue, since she believes that the American society is becoming increasingly progressive.

Interviewee Mary Pechauer and her husband Tom Undland also gave all of their children the middle name Pechauer. Mary told us,

We decided early on that both of our last names are not easy or typical. No one knows how to spell or pronounce either of our names, so we did not want to hyphenate. We decided early on that all of our children would have Pechauer as a middle name and Undland as a last name. I do think part of that was influenced by the patriarchal culture that we are in. My husband is the only boy in his family and I only have one brother. If he had a brother, we may have talked through that a little bit more, but all of his sisters had been married and none of them had kept their names. I have two girls and two boys. Our kids are doing okay. My oldest has said that she loves winning the 'weirdest middle name' competition at the lunch table.

Interviewee Dana Harrison Burwell only gave one of her children the middle name Harrison. She told us,

My mother's mother's maiden name was Nelson and she married a Harrison, but all the Nelson sisters did... My family was kind of a matriarchal family at that time. It was particularly strong on that side. There were three sisters on that side of the Nelson family. Anyway, my grandmother married John Harrison and Harrison became my mother's last name. I was very close to my mother's parents, so I named my son Brad Harrison Rippe. I learned that sometimes it's common for women to pass down their female names to their daughters, but I did not do that with my daughters.

Our professor Sarah Hautzinger was given her father's last name at birth and later considered taking her mother's last name, but did not do so because she thought that it would hurt her father's feelings. She would have also had a different last name from her brothers, and she did not want to make that much of a fuss.

Hyphenated last names are also becoming increasingly popular. Interviewee Isaac Rowe-Raitin told us,

My mother's original last name is Rowe and my father's original last name is Raitin. My parents decided that they wanted to have a two word last name, but they both ended up blaming each other for the decision, I think. They're divorced now, by the way. Part of it

was my mother wanting to retain her maiden name. But my father also claims that my mother wanted to it because it was popular at the time. I don't know if that's true, though. I just remember filling out all the bubbles on the SATs, for my last name. I can't imagine adding onto that, so I don't think that I'll do something similar when I get married. I don't want a three word last name. I've never really had any major difficulties with my last name, but it's definitely more cumbersome than having a one name last name. When I was working at an elementary school, I just went by Raitin, because the two word last name would have confused the kids.

Interviewee Maria Mulligan-Buckmiller has a hyphenated last name, although her parents do not. She told us,

My mother's last name is Mulligan and my father's last name is Buckmiller. When they got married, my mom decided to keep her maiden name, which is Molly Mulligan. My dad kept his name too, but they hyphenated mine. I remember in preschool, they cut off Mulligan for "ease of access". They didn't want a preschooler to have to spell. Nowadays, I still don't go by my full hyphenated last name. It's such a mouthful. I just go by Maria Buckmiller, even though that's not my legal name. It doesn't even matter if I change it legally when I get married, because naming is such a patriarchal process. It'll die out eventually. I might as well just keep my name, I guess. Names aren't that big of a deal. If I choose to adopt another last name, it's not going to reflect poorly on my independence or show that I'm somehow inherently dependent on men. I don't think that adopting a name has anything to do with feminism.

Interviewee Renee Yoelin-Allen was born Renee Yoelin, but both she and her husband changed their names when they married. She told us,

My husband's last name is Allen. I knew I couldn't be Allen, because it just wasn't me. I had to decide if I wanted to be Yoelin-Allen or just Yoelin. I wanted to keep Yoelin, because I had a difficult childhood and it reminded me of it. The last name Yoelin is from Russia and three generations back, my family immigrated to The United States. I wanted to keep that history. My brother, sister, and I had this thing where we wanted to be this whole new type of Yoelin. We were not going to be the people who came before us. We were going to be healthy. That is why I kept the last name Yoelin as part of my name. That was who I was and I didn't want to completely change who I was, just because I was getting married. I like how unique Yoelin is. Allen is not unique and I don't like that. I know that it is a mouthful to say Yoelin-Allen, but it's one of a kind.

Interviewee Lisa Cipriany-Dacko was born Lisa Cipriany, but she and her husband also decided to hyphenate. She told us,

Because I was a physical therapist for eight to ten years before I got married, everyone already knew me professionally by Cipriany. That was one reason I wanted to keep my name. I had so many professional contacts out there. I just wanted people to remember and being able to recognize me. Then, because my only brother Allen had died, I wanted to keep the name Cipriany around just for my father. I was pretty independent by the time that I got married. My daughters Emily and Sarah only have their father's last name. I didn't want them to have to worry about having a long last name, because that's such a hassle. There are a lot of disadvantages to my last name. It's a real pain sometimes. All the time, I use my whole, hyphenated last name and sometimes people just call me

Dacko. I even had a lawyer say to me once, “What is your name, anyhow? Is it Cipriany? Is it Dacko? Is it Cipriany-Dacko?”

The taking of women’s last names does not only occur within heterosexual relationships, though. Interviewee Catherine Smith told us,

Mandy and I had a commitment ceremony about two and a half years ago and at the time, we both decided to keep our maiden names. Mandy is now eight months pregnant, and I’ll be a parent soon. It has definitely caused the conversation to resurface. It’s something that I have considered for the last two and a half years. We haven’t officially made any decisions, but we wanted to revisit the last names, because clearly we have to decide what the baby’s last name will be. We want to be able to reflect a family unit. My last name is Smith, obviously. It’s very common and generic, so I hold no attachment to it. I also feel slightly disconnected from my last name, because my father’s parents and the rest of his side of the family are not supportive of my relationship with Mandy. That complicates things.

Mandy’s last name is Steponowski and although it is a mouthful, both Catherine and Mandy like the name. Mandy has a strong relationship with her heritage and background, so she does not want to change her name. Because Catherine is not attached to her last name, she is considering changing it to Steponowski. On the topic of their child’s last name, Catherine said, “We have talked about potentially giving the child two middle names,” with the second middle name being Smith. Catherine also said that it is less likely that it will happen though. They will probably end up being the Steponowski family. Because her father is supportive of the relationship and understands that his siblings and parents are not, he has begun to separate from that part of his family. Catherine’s father is also completely supportive of her changing her last name.

Catherine also believes that her father realizes that if she had married a man, she would have taken that last name. She said, “It’s not an issue. My mother also has had a difficult time with my father’s side of the family, so she is supportive of me changing my last name as well.” Support from important friends and family makes any difficult decision easier.

Interviewee Cole McNaughton Somers grew up with two mothers, Jocelyn and Kathy, who later separated. He told us,

My grandfather made up the last name Somers when he came to America. He was a German Jew fleeing Nazi Germany. He went on to work as a medic for the American soldiers and wanted to revoke any and all German nationalism. I think that he figured that Summers sounded much more American than his last name, which was Zolmets. He changed his last name to Summers, and just spelled it a little bit differently. I’m not sure why. Anyway, I ended up with Jocelyn’s last name as my last name and Kathy’s last name as my middle name. I’ve never really had any problems with my name. I like it.

Interviewee Freda Hawver-Pachter has two lesbian mothers, Tammy Pachter and Staci Hawver, and two gay fathers, but her name is a combination of her mothers’ last names. She told us,

My mothers, Tammy Pachter and Staci Hawver, are lesbians and my fathers are gay. Basically, my mothers are my legal guardians and my fathers are not, but I still see them all the time. My family didn’t originally intend for my fathers to have so much of a presence in my life, but it just ended up being that way. My biological mother, Tammy, and my biological father went to college together and were friends, so that’s how it

happened. Before I was born, my mothers decided that I would take both of their last names, just because they love each other and it'd be equal that way. I guess traditionally people take their father's last name, but since they didn't think my fathers would be such a huge part of my life, they didn't really consider that as an option. I guess my mothers just assumed that my biological father would just be a sperm donor that I saw every so often. So, that's my family background.

Freda has a brother from the same father, but he is biologically Staci's son. Freda and her brother have the same last name, but her brother's is not hyphenated. Freda seems to take her last name light-heartedly, sometimes jokingly calling herself Freda Harry Potter. She likes her last name and "never asked them about the order of Hawver-Pachter or about how it sounded", though she thinks that it would be interesting to do so. Before Staci's grandfather died, he had a huge project of finding all the Hawver's ever, which he passed onto Freda's grandfather. They got pretty far into the project, so it's a big deal on the Hawver side of the family. For that reason, Freda doubts that Staci would ever want to drop the last name Hawver, since it carries so much tradition.

Tammy's mother still has the last name Pachter, even though she got divorced from her first husband. On that subject, Freda told us,

My grandmother remarried to my grandfather, Bill Winn. My mother, Tammy, still carries the last name Pachter and I'm kind of surprised my grandmother still does. I talked to my grandfather Herv Pachter all the time, so I'm pretty attached to that part of my last name as well. It's going to be complicated when I have to name my children, because I'm not dropping my last name. It's going to be really difficult, actually. I remember listening to an NPR piece on this a couple months ago. If my husband isn't willing to drop his last name, then my kids might end up having three names. And what if I marry someone with another hyphenated last name? That would be a disaster. Maybe we'll just make up a new name. That'd be kind of cool. I just know that I wouldn't want to drop either name, for the sake of my mothers' feelings too. I wouldn't even know which name to drop.

Freda does not consider herself to be an avid feminist, but still does not like the idea of having to get rid of part of her identity. She never really had a strong urge to get married, since her parents were denied the right to marriage for such a long time. She never really thought that it made much of a difference and always told her parents that she would "have a love celebration, instead of a marriage celebration." She likes the idea of a wedding celebration, but did not strongly desire the legal status of being married. She mentioned that both heterosexual and homosexual couples who are not married that she knows, who seem to be doing just fine, but still does not fully reject the idea of marriage.

When asked about future children taking their father's last name, Freda told us about a family she knows,

They're really close family friends, actually. We call them the Berliners, even though the mom, Sherry, who I used to work for, kept her last name. Sherry's last name is Evans and the kids both have the father's last name, Berliner. I really don't think it makes a huge difference. I don't think it makes her any less their mom. I think she just wanted to keep her last name, because it sounds better than Berliner. She has a career, too. I have a personal connection to my last name, but I don't think that I would be offended if my

husband wanted our children to have his last name, unless it sounded really ugly or something. I guess it would be kind of weird, but it would make it easier to deal with the whole last name situation, at least. A hyphenated two name last name is hard enough for me, so I wouldn't want my children to have a three name last name, hyphenated or unhyphenated.