

By Rhea Jain

How Divorce Influences Name Change

During the course of the interviewing process, many interviewees touched on the topic of divorce influencing their decision to change their names. Many women choose to either change or not change their name when they get married, but the issue becomes more complicated when that marriage falls through. Those who originally chose not to change from their maiden name to their husband's last name faced a less problematic situation, but many women choose to either change their name back or keep their married name after the divorce. Jennifer Gillis stated:

It's just funny, because I'm at that age as well, when I just have a lot of friends that are divorced, and many of them now are like, "I wish I'd never changed my name!" Because the ones that are closest don't have children, so for them it was just a headache. My friend today was just telling me how -she's been divorced for a year and a half - it was just today that her company finally got her a new email address with her maiden name. It's just been a long process. So I think from that perspective, you know, if you're not having kids, I don't really know. I don't really know the big reason to do it, unless you just like a different name.

Gillis touches on the inconveniences related to changing a name and how those inconveniences inspired regrets in her friends who chose to change their name when they got married and then ended up getting divorced. She also speaks of the difference in situation if children are involved. This idea of symbolic (and maybe even legal) ownership of a child is related to a name. If a person is not having children, that idea of family unity might not be as important, in which case it might be a better option to not change your name at marriage at all. Renee Yoelin-Allen talked about her mother and how she constantly changed her name with every marriage and divorce and Renee said, "...I thought that was ridiculous. What I saw is that it was a lot of work and it changes your identity and who you are and so it kept changing and I didn't think it was a good idea." Renee not only spoke of it as an inconvenience, but something that makes your identity unstable.

Another recurring theme was how a person's name relates to their personal and professional identity, which can be complicated if they become divorced from a person who gave them that name. Andrea Lucard was sharing her mother's story of how she got divorced after twenty years and legally changed her name to a hyphenated version of her maiden name and her married name. A piece from that interview is,

[She did it] Because she didn't want to lose the fact that she had twenty years of connection to my father, but she also wanted to reclaim her identity in her maiden name. [Hautzinger] *Do you think it was the connection to your father, or having her children's names?* It was about her history.

Lucard's mother had created such a personal history and identity with her married name that she didn't want to part with it, but instead added her own twist by adding her maiden name. That way she was able to combine both identities and retain both her nuclear and ancestral family history. Another example of this is someone who had professional success using a married name. Christina Anderson did not change her name after her

divorce and instead gave her child, Angela, whom she had with a different person, her ex-husband's name that she had kept. Although this was not her maiden name, Christina formed an identity professionally with her changed name, yet still wanted family unity between her and her daughter.

Although many women choose not to change their name back from their married name, for personal, professional or sentimental reasons, many women do choose to change back to their maiden name. One woman, Renee Dyer, was happy to change her name back because she said "I can't wait and other people can't wait till I get my last name changed from Dyer to White [laughs] Dyer is a name in this town that you shouldn't have [laughs]. Because of that family's... That family's reputation around town, and his reputation around town as well." She was happy to be able to distance herself from her married name and from what people might associate her with. I'm sure many more women would like to distance themselves from the people they divorce and they might see changing their name back as one way to do so. Others might just be happy to reclaim their maiden name, such as Harrison Burwell. Her interviewer asked if she had gotten positive feedback from her friends and family after she returned to her maiden name and the response was, "Yeah! I have from lots of friends, lots of women and think it's nice that I've taken my name back." She and her friends are both happy that she was able to reclaim her personal identity.

Overall, divorce is a messy affair that many people deal with in different ways. Depending on the situation some women identify with their married names in a way they don't want to lose, others find name changing a hassle, and some just want to distance themselves from their spouse's family as much as possible. Unity is also an important factor in making a decision after a divorce. Some of the people interviewed wanted to stay connected to their children, or wanted to reclaim their unity with their family versus their spouse's family. Although people will react differently to divorce, the recurring themes that were evidenced in these interviews really shed light on why people make the choices they do.