

# Why do most women still take their husband's last name when getting married?

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It's been over 50 years since there was a legal and cultural shift around women keeping their last names when they married. But many women who marry men still opt to change their name to their husband's upon

saying, "I do."

A 2023 survey from Pew Research showed four out of five women in the United States who married men took their husband's last name.

Why does this tradition remain so ingrained?

"In a word: patriarchy," said Suzanna Danuta Walters, professor and director of women's, gender, and sexuality studies at Northeastern University. "It's not all that complicated. ... As much as we've made so many gains and transformed the way people think about gender, those ideologies are very hard to undo."

The concept of a woman taking a man's last name goes back to the 15th century when women were legally considered their husband's once they married. But it wasn't until the 1970s that many states began shifting their laws to make it easier for women to keep their surname upon getting married. Before this, many local laws prohibited women from doing things like getting paychecks, passports, and driver's licenses or voting if they kept their name upon getting married, according to Time magazine.

"With the advent of what's called the second wave of feminism from the '60s on is when all this got challenged in the courts so that women could get [bank accounts](#) in their own name," Walters said. "These things were fought over by feminist legal activists and feminist political activists. There was a period in the '70s when there was a real uptick in women keeping their own names. And now we're back to these new statistics."

But despite this, Time also reports that the number of women keeping their surname went from about 17% in the 1970s to the approximately 20% who do so today.

Walters said she often talks to [young women](#) who acknowledge the sexist roots of this tradition, but plan to take their husband's name anyways. Their reasoning is often that it's easier to go along with tradition and they want the same last name as their children. Some also say their spouse wants them to do it.

In contrast, few ever consider having their husband take their name, Walters said. The data backs this up: The same Pew survey reported that 92% of men who married women kept their name, while only 5% took their wife's name.

Walters said many consider the idea of a man taking a wife's name is "emasculating," which shows how gender-based this tradition really is.

"We've had hundreds of years of women taking their husband's last name," she said. "Why don't we have hundreds of years of men taking women's last names? Women say 'Oh, it's easier.' Great. Why shouldn't he do that? To me, how it's not just tradition, but political, is exemplified by the fact very few people are making that claim. ... If that's your argument, that it's difficult to do and we all want the same name, (men can) get rid of theirs."

An even smaller number of people hyphenate their name: Only 5% of women did so when they married a man while less than 1% of men did the same. Walters points to the same ideas about last names for the reasons behind these numbers.

While it may seem easier to go with tradition, Walters said she hopes to see more women start to think about the implication of this particular practice, especially given its history.

"The idea that it doesn't say something about the relations of men and women in the institution of marriage helps keep that inequality in place,"

Walters said.

"It's not benign. What's so strange about it to me when I see those statistics is this is not tough. There are lots of things that are harder to change. This is one that every single woman and every single man in marriage could do. A lot of [women](#) who are feminists say, 'I don't want to rock the boat.' If this little thing rocks the boat, then what big things are you not going to want to rock the boat on? Inequality functions on multiple levels and marriage is a central institution in our culture. And yet we are so hesitant to actually alter it in ways that are more equitable."

**More information:** Study: [www.pewresearch.org/short-read ...  
-husbands-last-name/](http://www.pewresearch.org/short-read...-husbands-last-name/)

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