

# The Influence of Choice Feminism on Women's and Men's Attitudes towards Name Changing at Marriage: An Analysis of Online Comments on UK Social Media

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Analysis of name changing choices women have undertaken in English-speaking Western countries such as the USA and in the UK indicate that there are various predictors of whether women change their name at marriage or not, one of which is whether they identify as a feminist. This research examines the views of women and men on the issue of choice in name changing at marriage on a UK-based internet forum, Mumsnet, and in the British newspaper *The Guardian* online and explores whether identification with feminism has an influence on traditional name changing choices performed by women and men. The paper concludes that societal change is necessary to accommodate genuine free choice in name changing at marriage.

KEYWORDS marriage, women, marital name, feminism, choice, identity, Great Britain.

## Introduction

This paper presents research into the views of women and men on the issue of choice in name changing at marriage on a UK-based internet forum, Mumsnet, and in response to an article on this subject in the online edition of the British newspaper *The Guardian*. Analysis of the name changing choices women undertake in English-speaking Western countries such as the USA and in the UK indicate that there are various predictors of whether women change their name at marriage or not, such as their educational level and whether they identify as a feminist.

Western feminists in the 1960s and 1970s focused on the constraints women faced in making free choices and actively campaigned for changes to sexist social, economic, and political systems, but more recently the dominant feminist position has been choice feminism, an approach which argues that women's decisions and their individual choices are inherently feminist (Budgeon 2015). However, the fracturing of feminist principles such as equality from wider structures has led to disagreements, most notably between choice feminists and older, more traditional feminist positions. In the former, if any differences remain between men and women, they can be accounted for by an individual's choices rather than being a result of sexism and patriarchal institutions as, for example, socialist or radical feminists suggest (Crossley 2010). Attitudes towards marriage is one area where these disagreements are played out.

Despite being almost universal, marriage and family have been accompanied by enormous variations in how they are organized, including naming practices. Research on this issue is predominantly North American (Johnson and Scheuble 1995; Kerns 2011; Laskowski 2010; Lillian 2009; Lockwood, Burton, and Boersma 2011; Scheuble and Johnson 1998, 2005, 2016; Scheuble, Klingemann, and Johnson 2000; Stoiko and Strough 2017; Suter 2004; Twenge 1997) and, to a lesser extent, British (Finch 2008; Thwaites 2013), reflecting the traditionally different naming culture in English-speaking countries compared with other parts of the world where women predominantly retain their birth name at marriage (Abela and Walker 2014; Boxer and Gritsenk 2005; Noack and Wiik 2008; Zhu 2010).

In England and Wales <sup>1</sup>, women can use their marriage certificate to change their name legally and without financial cost with various institutions, such as banks, the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency and Her Majesty's Passport Office. Men wanting to change their name to that of their wife's must do so using the formal "deed poll" method. Since 2014 same-sex couples have been able to change their name to that of either spouse using their marriage certificate[s]. Same-sex and opposite-sex couples can use both partners' names in combination by doubling or hyphenating their names, but this requires using a legal process (deed poll) to apply to change names on official documents. The law in England and Wales does not require women to change their names, but it does discourage other options, in that the state encourages the status quo in the ease by which heterosexual women can change their name upon marriage, but heterosexual men cannot.

## The research sample and methods

The use of online readers' comments and message board threads in research is relatively unusual, and as with any other methodology there are advantages and disadvantages (Lindgren 2017). Readers' comments are a popular way for users to interact with online media because they can express their reaction to news stories, contribute their views to opinion pieces, and have a public debate with other users through discussion (Ürper and Çevikel 2014). Readers' comments sections provide a space for public discourse that is both unique and constructive (Manosevitch and Walker 2009).

Mumsnet is a website for parents which hosts discussion forums where users share advice and information on parenting and other topics. The forum feature on Mumsnet operates when a person (referred to as the original poster, or OP) asks a question or

makes a statement; this begins the “thread” (a sequence of responses) where by other users of the site then respond to the original poster to answer the question posed or to make a comment. On particularly busy threads, several different “conversations” can be continuing concurrently and the thread may deviate from the original subject and some commenters will be having separate exchanges with other individuals or small groups alongside the main discussion in the thread.

The Mumsnet thread under analysis here began on 1 December 2015 at 21:42 under the headline “I really hate that women lose their surnames upon marriage”. The poster says she comes from a culture where women retain birth names (she uses the phrase “maiden name”). She says she struggles to decipher who people are on the social networking site Facebook because their names have changed and asks whether there is an option to include maiden names in their details. She says she understands that the paternal naming system is convenient but expressed frustration at her difficulty in finding and reconnecting with old friends on Facebook.

The first response, two minutes after the original post, is a comment from a poster stating her personal experience putting her maiden name in brackets after her married name on Facebook. There were 314 posts from the original post until it ends on 6 December at 9:13. The thread, which in line with Mumsnet’s retention policy was deleted after 90 days, was printed out by the author and consisted of 75 pages of text. Approval was sought and granted from administrators at Mumsnet to use the thread for research purposes providing participants were anonymized. These pages were read through several times and initial themes identified. Then each line was numbered and subjected to thematic analysis to extract the major themes from the postings.

The author decided that Mumsnet would be a good place to access data from a predominantly female environment in a forum where contributors and readers felt connected to each other and where trust, belonging and support has been established within that online community (Binns 2012). Both samples were opportunistic, in that they were published while the author was researching the issue under consideration.

The article under consideration (Filipovic 2013) was published on 7 March 2013 at 16:19 in *The Guardian*’s comment is free (CIF) section, an area of the online publication where readers are actively encouraged to engage with the article. There is a *Guardian* member’s community and some contributors to this thread may have joined this, but with 120 million monthly unique browsers in 2015 (Baird 2015), Guardian.com has a wider and less connected audience than Mumsnet. The use of the thread for research purposes is covered by Guardian.com in their “fair terms and usage”.

The article begins with a discussion of the negative social perceptions towards women who do not change their names, the gender inequality in marital name changing, how these differences are examples of sexism in society, and the close correlation of names and identity. It concludes with the proposition that in order to correct this injustice, men should change their names to that of their wives when they marry. The first comment to this article was published at 16:23. There were more far responses (1568) to the *Guardian* thread, reflecting the larger audience this has compared with that of the specialist Mumsnet. In 2015 Mumsnet had 7.5 million users (Roberts 2015) and there were 314 comments on the thread under consideration here.

It is no surprise that the conversations between posters on the Mumsnet thread were women talking to other women, while *The Guardian* thread hosted many male

commenters. The practice of user names (nicknames) means that it is not always possible to determine the gender of a poster; however, many do use real names or variations on this, or make comments in their posts that allow for the identification of a poster's gender.

## Thematic analysis of data

The two threads were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; Charmaz 2006; Laskowski 2010). Thematic analysis of qualitative data is a means to identify, analyze, and report topics from within the data, and when the researcher starts to observe patterns of meaning and repetition, these are built on from the continuous study of the data. Coding schemes are produced based on this systemic search for patterns and meanings, with initial codes being generated from searching and reviewing themes. Despite there not being a hypothesis for this study, prior research assisted in the developing of themes and codes, as did the researcher's own personal experiences. While some of the themes arising from this research could be predicted, such as women saying they changed their names because they wanted a united family name and women stating they did not change their name because of their professional identity, the feminist disagreements that ensued, which is the basis of this paper, had not been expected by the researcher, nor the intensity of male comments on what was perceived to be a specifically female issue.

The participants on the Mumsnet threads sought to determine what feminism was – to them, to others, and in general – mostly in a friendly way. In the *Guardian* thread, there were a number of comments actively hostile to feminism (in whatever form), with the word feminist prefaced with adjectives such as “stupid”, “militant”, “ultra”, “dishonest”, “strident”, “fruitcake” and descriptions of feminism as being anti-men (Rich 2005). The author seemed to acknowledge the article might provoke a reaction by beginning the article with the line “excuse me while I play the cranky feminist for a minute” (Filipovic 2013). The author received some personal criticism from posters such as “the sexist bliss of Jill Wotsherface”; “Jill ... I could become a Filipovic for a long weekend ... If you play your cards right!” However, these are comments that remain after 47 posts were taken down and replaced with “this comment was removed by a moderator because it didn't abide by our community standards”. *The Guardian* commissioned research into the 70 million comments left on their site in the 10 years to 2016. They observed that articles about feminism resulted in high numbers of blocked comments, and the research also found that of their 10 most abused writers, eight are women and the two men are black (Gardiner et al. 2016). The advantages of social media, such as increased participation of people due to it being a democratic public sphere, mean that people express themselves more openly and feel more disinhibited (Suller 2004), but the disadvantages are that women can receive threats and abuse (Hardaker 2010; Lewis, Rowe, and Wiper 2016).

## Findings

Although there were commonalities, there were differences between the Mumsnet and the *Guardian* threads. For example, the code including the search terms “choice”, “choose”, and “choosing” was the most frequently mentioned code for the Mumsnet thread (112 mentions from 314 comments in total) and although it frequently occurred

on the *Guardian* thread it was the third most popular code, behind those of “identity” and “child/ren”, mentioned 110 times from 1568 comments.

In subjecting the thread to analysis using the search term “choice” (or choose, choosing, etc.), a series of sub-themes were identified. For example, one recurring theme was that “choice” was a paternal one in any circumstances. One respondent, who I have called SSS, said:

A choice between your father’s name or your husband’s name isn’t a major feminist point either way. (Mumsnet – SSS)

Another respondent stated:

First of all, a woman’s maiden name is actually her father’s name. If a woman doesn’t want to take her husband’s name because of the patriarchal implications, then surely she must realize that her own name is her father’s name and she is already part of a patriarchal line and is just continuing that whether she keeps that name or takes her husband’s name. (Mumsnet – LBB)

These comments reflect the impermanence that Filipovic refers to in her article and it led to some comments from posters about how women often feel that their name is not actually theirs, and because of this women have a transitory identity.

From a young age I knew that women traditionally took their husband’s name (I knew my Mum and grandmothers had, for example) and I always assumed I would get married so I guess I’d grown up with the assumption that I would only be keeping my name until marriage. (Mumsnet – A160)

Another respondent states her feelings about the temporariness of her birth name:

I was happy to lose mine as it really wasn’t mine to keep anyway and was awful. (Mumsnet – NL4 M)

However, the idea that a woman’s name at birth is impermanent was challenged by other respondents.

If you’re born with a name, it IS your name. It doesn’t really matter if it was inherited from your father or your mother. It’s your name. Your husband’s name, by contrast, is just that, your husband’s name. (Mumsnet – KTK)

Another respondent asks a question about this issue:

Why do some women value themselves so little that they don’t even own their birth names? (Mumsnet – ARY)

There were discussions about just how much “choice” women did have and this was hotly debated in the threads. Within the Mumsnet thread there were respondents stating both points but there were slightly more respondents who felt that society constrains women’s choices.

Make what choice you will, but it is not a neutral decision until the expectation that a woman will change her name and man will not has died out. (Mumsnet – BL)

It’s great that it’s a choice, but most women are making the traditional patriarchal choice and therefore – is it really their choice? (Mumsnet – MP)

Whereas some respondents argue that choices are limited in a patriarchal society, other women used their identification as feminists to argue that women's choices are inherently feminist.

I resent being told that feminism isn't about choice. It is all about being free to choose.  
(Mumsnet – MHAB)

The above respondent, MHAB, was vocal in her opinion that name changing was all about choice and whatever women's decisions on this issue were this should be respected. There was disagreement about whether women's choices were feminist.

I don't care what anyone else chooses to do. But the OP's suggestion that to change your name is somehow anti-feminist is a pile of old twaddle and did stir me up somewhat.  
(Mumsnet – PTAP)<sup>2</sup>

In response, BR says:

But it *is* anti-feminist. That's not to say people shouldn't do it, or that *feminists* can't do it. But it is an anti-feminist thing to do. A feminist can decide, in particular circumstances, to make an anti-feminist choice. (Mumsnet – BR)

There was quite a lot of defensiveness as many women felt they were making informed choices, choices that they felt feminism had given to them. Not surprisingly, they felt they were being lectured by some other women who were challenging their perceptions of what feminism is.

People really do look into other people's choices too much ... Feminism is largely about choice and women can have the choice to change their names or not, so let them be! (Mumsnet – PC)

I changed my name because I wanted to – it had nothing to do with social expectations. Feminism is all about choice to me. I can't see any progress if we are constrained to doing things we are told by other women who want to read things into a simple choice. (Mumsnet – MHAB)

However, there were comments that counterbalanced these perceptions.

Feminism is not just about choice. Feminism is about the societal expectations that push us to make certain choices. (Mumsnet – IBTAB)

The commentators on the *Guardian* thread contained a tone of dismissiveness about the importance of the issue, despite there being over 1000 comments posted in just a few days, and it was notable that the majority who suggested this issue was not important and trivial were men.

There are far far far more important women's issues to get worked up about. (*Guardian* – AC)  
Life is full of difficult choices, and rather silly articles. (*Guardian* – GB)

Although there were some men who were a little more reflective of the thread:

I've always quite liked it that my wife took my surname. This article makes me feel guilty, but I'm not sure why. I really shouldn't read CIF. (*Guardian* – QTE)

I would find it a bit emasculating if I got married and my wife didn't use my name, I'm sure I'll get a bit of stick for this but most people feel the same way or it wouldn't keep happening. (*Guardian* – LOT)

In the comments coded to “choice” on the *Guardian* thread, the majority of posters state that name changing is a choice and there were quite vigorous defenses of choice as the overwhelming dominant position that women take on this issue even among those who disagree with the custom.

Some people still choose to, and it may seem inexplicable to you and me, but as long as we are confident that the decision was freely made we have no business criticizing them for that choice. (*Guardian* – ICHUM)

It's the choice of the woman and believe it or not, most women eagerly take their husband's last names. I remember telling my ex that she could keep her last name. (*Guardian* – JoeP)

When I married, I let my wife know she could keep her name or change it; it really didn't matter to me either way. I was marrying a person, not a word. (*Guardian* – NH)

However, there is a double standard in name changing behaviors and expectations. Women were more likely to report changing names so they could have the same name as their children and so they could be a “family unit”, whereas “passing on the family name” was deemed important by several male commentators on the *Guardian* thread:

If me and DP<sup>3</sup> get married I will probably take his name because I like it and we gave DS<sup>4</sup> his surname, so I would like us all to have the same name. (Mumsnet – OAN)

My wife was pretty happy to take my surname thanks, and as tradition goes it is a bit benign. Call me selfish Jill but as an only son with a bit of a rare surname I wish to be able to pass my last name on to my children as well. (*Guardian* – CV)

## Discussion and conclusions

The findings of this study reflect those from others conducted where the researchers identify that most motivations regarding name changing highlighted concern with social relations such as family unity and upholding tradition (Goldin and Shim 2004; Gooding and Kreider 2010; Scheuble and Johnson 2005, 2007). Stoiko and Strough (2017), in their study of Atlantic University students, report that participants demonstrated an internalized double standard in that the obligation to preserve family unity falls on women and not men. As in this research, men's rationale for assuming any name changing would be done by women was because it is the norm and traditional, while women's reasonings for changing were to uphold family unity, show their commitment to the marriage, and to engage with tradition. Even though identity was mentioned many times on both online threads, it was often in relation to a joint identity for married couples, or in terms of having a family identity rather than individual self-identity (Twenge 1997).

There can be negative societal attitudes towards women who do not change their name at marriage (Murray 1997), particularly if they plan to have children (Scheuble and Johnson 1998). Women are judged harshly for non-conventional decisions, and previous research shows that the public think women who do not change their names when they marry are less committed to their marriages, less nurturing, and less likely to make good wives (Forbes et al. 2002; Murray 1997). Given the social construction of “women's choices”, historically and structurally (Budgeon 2015), the reliability of individual choice as a guarantor of freedom is open to debate. Choice feminism provides a

validation of the act of choice, not the context of the act (Swirsky and Angelone 2014), which of course might be radically undermining of women's autonomy (Marso 2006).

As with the UK, in the USA changing names after marriage is straightforward, filling out some forms and without court involvement, although each state may have slightly different rules and regulations. Regarding heterosexual marriage, both the UK and USA require additional procedures for any variation other than a woman taking her husband's surname; so a formal name change via legal proceedings will need to be filed in all other circumstances, such as a wife hyphenating (double barreling) her own and her husband's name, and vice versa; a man taking his wife's last name; or a couple choosing a new name that is not already held by either of them. That state authorities have such inequity in the fabric of the institution is perhaps not a surprise as laws can often, intentionally or otherwise, support male privilege over women. However, if laws changed to make it easier for men and women to change names or hyphenate, men may be more willing to cede some of their naming advantages – this research, in common with other studies on this topic, indicate that only a tiny minority of men are willing to do so currently – if the process becomes more normalized. Then women, feminist or not, may really truly have a choice.<sup>5</sup>

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> There are differences between the English legal system which applies to England and Wales and the legal system of Scotland (the countries which constitute Great Britain). For example, the legal minimum age to marry without parental consent is 16 years in Scotland and 18 years in England and Wales. The Civil Partnership Act 2004 is UK-wide legislation (i.e. includes Northern Ireland), whereas England and Wales legislated for same-sex marriage in 2013 and Scotland did so in 2014. Same-sex marriage is currently not available in Northern Ireland.
- <sup>2</sup> This is despite the OP's comment not mentioning feminism.
- <sup>3</sup> On Mumsnet abbreviations are used to indicate significant relationships, DP refers to Dear Partner.
- <sup>4</sup> DS refers to Dear Son.
- <sup>5</sup> All names have been anonymized.

## Disclosure statement

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