

Selection 21

Should a Wife Keep Her Name?

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(1) Encouraged by feminism to maintain their separate identities, many brides have chosen to keep their maiden name* or to combine it somehow with their husband's name. Yet the emotional and technical problems that arise from this decision have made some women think twice.

(2) "I felt an obligation to carry on the family name and heritage," says Catherine Bergstrom-Katz, an actress. "But I also believed that combining our names was the fair thing to do; if I was going to take my husband's name, the least he could do was take mine." Her husband's legal name now is also Bergstrom-Katz. Though he does not use it at work, it is on all the couple's legal documents—mortgage, house deed, insurance and credit cards. Mail comes addressed to both spouses under their own names, their hyphenated name and, says Catherine, "sometimes to 'Allan Bergstrom.'" The couple's first child was named Sasha Bergstrom-Katz.

(3) Not all wives are so adamant. Some use their maiden name in business and their husband's name socially. And a growing number of women who once insisted on hyphenating maiden and married names have dropped the hyphen and are using the maiden name as a middle name.

(4) Despite the popular use of linked, merged or shared names, "there is still a surprising amount of opposition to the idea," says Terri Tepper, who for many years ran an information center in Barrington, Illinois, advising women who wished to retain their maiden names. Family counselors point out that it triggers highly emotional reactions, not only between the couple but also among parents and in-laws. "What about your silver and linens?" one woman asked her daughter. "How can I have them monogrammed if you and Bill have different names?"

(5) While such concerns may seem relatively trivial, there are others that raise significant issues.

- *Control and commitment.* "Names have always been symbols of power," says Constance Ahrons, a therapist at the University of Southern California. "To a modern woman, keeping her name is a symbol of her independence. But a man may feel that implies a lack of commitment to him and to the marriage." Thus when a San Diego woman

*Alternate terms for "maiden name" are often preferred because they are considered less demeaning to women; such terms include "given name," "family name," and "premarriage name," although these alternatives are only beginning to come into widespread use.

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told her fiancé she had decided to keep her name, he was hurt. "Aren't you proud to be my wife?" he asked. Most men are more understanding. When Maureen Poon, a publicist, married Russell Fear, her English-Irish husband sympathized with his wife's desire to preserve her Chinese-Japanese heritage, especially since she was an only child. "We began married life as Poon-Fear," says Maureen. "I've since dropped the hyphen—it just confuses too many people—but Russell continues to use it when we're out together. He feels that we are 'Poon-Fear,' that we are one."

- *Cultural differences.* "Men raised in a macho society find it hard to accept a wife who goes by her own name," says Dr. Judith Davenport, a clinical social worker. For example, New York-born Jennifer Selvy, now a riding instructor in Denver, says her Western-rancher fiancé was horrified that she wanted to keep her name. "What will my friends say?" he protested. "Nobody will believe we're married!" His distress was so real that Selvy reluctantly yielded.
- *What to name the children.* When couples began hyphenating surnames, it was amusing to consider the tongue-twisters that might plague the next generation. But psychologists point out that youngsters with complex names are often teased by classmates or embarrassed if their parents have different names. And how does one explain to grandparents that their grandchild, apple of their eye, will not be carrying on the family name?
- *Technical troubles.* While there are no legal barriers in any state to a woman's keeping her maiden name—or resuming it in midmarriage—technology can cause complications. Hyphenated names are often too long for computers to handle; others are likely to be filed incorrectly. One reason Maureen Poon-Fear dropped the hyphen in her name was "it created a problem in consistency." She explains: "The Department of Motor Vehicles lists me as POONFEAR. Some of my charge accounts are listed under 'P' and others under 'F,' and I was concerned about the effect on my credit rating if my payments were not properly credited."

(6) Given the difficulties of keeping one's maiden name in a society that has not yet fully adjusted to the idea, should a woman make the effort to do so?

(7) "Clearly, yes, if the name has value to her in terms of personal, family or professional identity," says Alan Loy McGinnis, co-director of the Valley Counseling Center in Glendale, California. "But if keeping one's maiden name makes either spouse feel less secure about the relationship, perhaps the couple needs to find another way to symbolize mutual commitment. After all, marriage today needs all the reinforcement it can get."

(792 words)