



# The Ms. Myth

All modern, career-minded brides keep their own last names, right? Not by a long shot. In fact, more and more women are opting for Mrs.

BY KRIS FRIESWICK

Growing up, Jessica Del Genio hated her last name. Surrounded by Smiths and Robertsons and Mitchells, she felt her Italian surname branded her family as immigrants. She couldn't wait until the day she got married and could change it. But somewhere between her discontented youth and the day she married her husband (who, although he didn't want it used in this story, has a last name "I would have killed for when I was a kid," she says), Del Genio developed a very successful business as a color and material stylist. When the big day came in 2002, Del Genio decided not to change her name, after all. "The primary reason I kept it was for professional reasons," says Del Genio, a 42-year-old living in West Roxbury. "I'm a specialist. If I changed my name, people would be like 'Who?'"

She did, however, plan on changing it when they had kids. They had kids. The name stayed. She planned on changing it when the kids started school. Kids started school, name stayed. Eventually, she remembers, her husband said to her, "Who are you kidding? You're never going to change your name." In the end, I'm glad I kept my name. I like my name.

Conventional wisdom holds that Del Genio's choice is typical for modern, heterosexual women who have a college degree and marry several years or more into a successful career. But the truth is that a married woman who keeps her original name is rare, and getting rarer.

A study of Massachusetts birth records showed that only 13 percent of white, married, college-graduate women, age 30 to 34, and having their first child in 2000 kept their given name, down from 17 percent in 1995 and 20.8 percent in 1990. (Name-hyphenators were a minuscule percent of the total.) Claudia Goldin, the Harvard economics professor who coauthored

the study, found that among 25- to 29-year-old white, married women with no college degree having their first child in 2000, only 3.1 percent kept their given name after marriage; it was 4.6 percent in 1995 and 4.3 percent in 1990. Black, married, college-graduate women, age 30 to 34, having their first child between 1996 and 2000, however, kept their names 34.2 percent of the time. Goldin notes that black women without a college degree kept their names at about the same rate as college-educated black women.

In other studies by Goldin, women without children have about the same rates of name keeping. Goldin hasn't repeated her study with more recent numbers. And that means she hasn't examined the practice of Massachusetts women who, since 2004, have married other women.

In an era when women enjoy historically unprecedented gender equality — from professional to political to (almost) financial — why would a heterosexual woman take her husband's name?

As a woman who did it, I can honestly say that I'm not sure. I made the decision standing in line at Boston City Hall, filling out our marriage license application. I didn't realize until that moment that I would have to declare my name intentions on that document, and I felt ambushed. I thought I'd have time to figure it out once we got married. So I punted. My last name became my middle, and I took my husband's last name.

I still use my maiden name professionally — it's my brand. (Goldin says female journalists are among those most likely to keep their given name at marriage.) I love my husband's last name, but after nearly seven years, it still doesn't feel like mine. I don't use it very often. If I had to do it over

again, I would not have changed it, because it caused more headaches than it cured. Even after I explain my situation, some clients continue to put the wrong name on paychecks and hotel and flight reservations. My friends are never sure how to introduce me. Name changing is a nice tradition. I felt that my husband and I created a family unified under a single flag, but if I'm brutally honest, changing my name made no sense for me.

But it made a lot of sense for Christine Valutkevich and her husband, Mark. "I didn't ever consider not taking his name," says the 41-year-old Hopkinton woman, who married in 2006 and has two daughters. "I felt it was one more concrete thing on paper that made us a couple."

Nor do some women who take a husband's name feel they're damaging the cause of feminism or hav-

woman to take her husband's name. About half of those polled felt so strongly about it that they said the government should *force* women to take their husband's name.

› Taking a husband's name is the embodiment of everything that feminism sought to end. The practice is a throwback to a time when a marriage was essentially a purchase and sale agreement and the woman's new last name was a public announcement of a change in ownership. Even though there are no US laws requiring a woman to take her husband's name, courts as recently as the 1970s upheld a state's right to force a woman to do so. We can thank a local girl – Lucy Stone, born in West Brookfield in 1818, who refused to take her husband's name – for launching the fight to allow all women to make that choice. (A statue of her adorns

breadwinner and woman is housewife. "So the woman takes his name because it's romantic," says Stasia. It's also inherently sexist, she says, because the name-change procedure is more difficult for men in many states than it is for women.

In Massachusetts, Party A and/or Party B in a marriage can announce the intention to change their last names to anything they want right on the marriage license application (with some legal parameters). Massachusetts is one of the few states that doesn't require men, and men only, to take the extra step and get a court order to change a last name after marriage.

› Experts have several theories about why name changing is experiencing a resurgence. Goldin recalls finding out that a younger acquaintance had taken her husband's last name, and when Goldin asked her why, she responded, "Claudia, your generation won all the battles so we don't have to do things like that anymore. I felt it was a total cop-out. Maybe it's that every generation eschews what their parents have done and only later do they recognize its value." Plus, says Goldin, the young woman is wrong – the battles aren't all won. Women still earn just 80 cents for every dollar a man earns, and women still face incidents of gender-based discrimination. But is the name debate really the battleground to continue the fight? Or is it just a leftover symbol?

"It depends on how much emphasis you put on symbolism," says Susan Douglas, professor of communication studies at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and author of next month's book *Enlightened Sexism: The Seductive Message That Feminism's Work Is Done*. "What's important is the nuts-and-bolts issues that women face. Inequities, the fact that the US has the worst public policies supporting mothers and children in any industrialized nation. I think these are the things we should be fighting for. The only issue with name changing is the extent to which it symbolizes giving over of oneself to another identity. To some

women it may be irrelevant."

However, she says, there may be something else going on, something that casts the supposed victory of feminism in an interesting new light.

While feminism and the equality it brought has become more or less mainstream, it has simultaneously "created anxiety about gender roles," says Douglas. "There's emerged a growing pressure to be both feminist and feminine at the same time. Maybe the trend [of taking a husband's name] is just a little tiny piece of how women are pressured to or want to cling to a tradition that is very tied up with notions of femininity. It may be one of these gestures to traditional femininity that is part of women's everyday calibration of themselves. We can't seem to be too manly, because women do get punished for that." So although women can exercise equality professionally by taking on traditional male roles like breadwinner, CEO, or political leader, they are expected to balance this out by embracing hyper-femininity.

This balancing act shows up in many ways. For instance, women who out-earn their husbands do a larger percentage of the household chores – a traditional female role – than do women who earn less than their husbands. In her book, Douglas explores the public drubbing handed out to former US Attorney General Janet Reno, a woman who Douglas says "looked at the masquerade of femininity and said 'no.' Women punish very visibly other women who do that – with humor, so it doesn't look too sexist."

If name changing is part of the feminism/femininity balancing act, the reversal of the name-keeping trend may be an improbably hopeful indicator of success in the struggle for gender equality. As long as our society continues to make progress on the larger, more meaningful equality issues, what, really, is in a name? ■

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## In a recent poll, about half of those surveyed said the government should *force* women to take their husband's name.

ing their identity subsumed. "I feel very confident that I am my own person," says 33-year-old Patricia Sheedy of Boston, who has a Harvard MBA and married RJ in 2007. The couple have a son. "I don't see my name as my identity. I see who I am as my identity," she says. "My name was just a label, and it didn't bother me at all."

Women like Valutkevich and Sheedy simply like the tradition of taking a married name, although neither felt pressure to do so by families or husbands. However, other women do feel more comfortable conforming to a practice that society is far from abandoning. A recent poll of US men and women by researchers from Indiana University and the University of Utah found that 71 percent of those surveyed agreed, either strongly or somewhat, that it was beneficial for a

the Commonwealth Avenue mall in Boston.) Today, the Lucy Stone League works for name equality and to try to persuade women they don't need to change their identity when they marry – a battle it appears to be losing.

"Changing your name is so illogical and so sexist," says Cristina Lucia Stasia, the president of the Lucy Stone League and a professor of women's studies at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. "What are we teaching our children when Mommy automatically takes Daddy's name? What are we saying about their personal history? What does it say about men who expect women to take their name?"

She chalks up the reversal in name keeping to the recent glamorization in pop culture of weddings and the romanticizing of traditional marriage in which man is