

THE NAME GAME

TO CHANGE OR NOT TO CHANGE? TO HYPHENATE? TO PULL A KIM KARDASHIAN WEST? AS WRITER **MIRIAM DATSKOVSKY** DISCOVERED, YOUR FINAL DECISION MAY SURPRISE YOU.



My fiancé, Bryan, and I stood in line at the county clerk's office. When it was our turn, we pushed our marriage license under the glass partition. "You don't want to change your last name?" said the clerk. I told her I hadn't decided. "If you do it now, it's free," she said. "If you wait, it will be \$200. Or more." I looked at Bryan, panicked. He led me out into the hall, took me by the shoulders, and said, "You don't have to decide right now." I knew I was marrying him for a reason.

Ever since I was a little girl, I'd wanted to change my last name. Dats-kov-sky. Even though it has no tricky vowel combos or umlauts to trip on, nobody could spell or pronounce it; teachers botched it and kids tittered. So when I was 25 and Bryan and I were getting serious, I openly started test-driving his name: Keefer. (No, he hadn't proposed yet, but we were pre-engaged, okay?) I loved it. My sister-in-law had taken Keefer, and I wanted to be part of the family too. Changing my name was pretty much a done deal. And I had a lot of company: A 2013

Facebook study found that 65 percent of 20-to-39-year-old women had changed their names after marriage. In fact, keeping your maiden name wasn't legal in most states until 1975, and since then its popularity has fluctuated, but it has never become the norm: A 2009 study of

New York Times wedding announcements in the journal *Social Behavior and Personality* found that 1 percent of brides kept their names in the '70s, 9 percent in the '80s, and nearly a quarter in the '90s, when the trend peaked. From 2000 to 2005, just 18 percent kept their names. (Yes, it's a rarefied sample, but it's the most comprehensive study I've seen.) Perhaps the postmillennium dip is due to the rising popularity of alternatives. In a 2013 survey conducted by MissNowMrs.com, 15 percent of women who changed their names made their maiden names their middle, and 4 percent more hyphenated.

I'd thought I was destined to join the changers until that moment at the clerk's office—and the months of flip-flopping that followed. I was so frozen by indecision that even when our wedding day arrived and it was time for the DJ to introduce

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us at the reception, we avoided the issue entirely and went with "Please welcome the newlyweds, Miriam and Bryan!"

Confiding in my married friends (and a few willing strangers as I researched this story), I learned that lots of women struggle when faced with the name-change question. My childhood friend Ari* never thought she'd take her husband's name. "I thought strong women kept theirs," she says, touching on a feeling common to many post-post- (post?) feminists. But for Ari, the personal trumped the political; she changed her name to symbolize her commitment to her husband and daughter. "Lots of my single friends gave me shit for it; they questioned whether I was sacrificing myself for the relationship," she says. "But I came to realize that being strong means deciding to do what makes me happy, and this does."

Meanwhile, Marie, a surgical resident, told me she'd been so adamant about making the choice herself, without the sway of her husband, that it had been a potential deal breaker when they were dating. "I refused to let a man dictate a decision that would change my identity," she says. She kept her maiden name with her husband's complete support.

For many women I talked to, the question was tangled up in ideas of identity, ethnicity, and

career. Izzy, a med student, made her maiden name her middle name for very personal reasons: Her dad died when she was six years old and "I couldn't let go of his legacy, especially because he was an only child," she says. Tori Oh, an ophthalmologist, noticed there were tons of doctors in medical journals identified as "T. Oh." To stand out professionally, she took her husband's name, Silva; she kept her maiden name as her middle name to honor her Korean heritage.

For plenty of others, the decision isn't so fraught. My neighbor Alexis got hitched during grad school and wanted to give her husband something special, but she had no money, so she took his name instead. And Heather, a lawyer, was just happy to dump her handle. "If your last name was Dykes, wouldn't you?" she deadpanned. One forward-thinking couple I spoke to crowd sourced their blended last name on Facebook. "Instead of bra burning, here was a practical way to make a statement within the system," says Ryan Cheresson, né Cheressnick, who married fellow filmmaker Lisette, née Johnson. "Chonson would've been my pick, but Lisette hated it." One of the simplest rationales for keeping her name came from television writer Molly Bennett: "I like the way my name sounds," she says. "And someone planned for it to sound that way. There was thought and care put into it."

As for me, months after the wedding I was still on the fence. Then one day I created my new "Miriam Keefer" Gmail address, which felt permanent and official. And that pushed me off the fence. As soon as I typed it, I had this visceral reaction: Miriam Keefer was just not me.

I give full props to everyone who decides to take the plunge and change her (or his!) name. Or to make her maiden her middle or combine with her spouse's... or, dare I say it, keep her name. You'll eventually know what's right for you—ideally without having to suffer through an existential crisis like I did. Still, once I made my decision, I was happy with it. I realized that I don't need to be a Keefer by name for Bryan and me to be a family. And I learned to love the name I was given, Miriam



Malka Datskovsky, in a way I never had before. **B**

Miriam Datskovsky is a TV writer. She and Bryan live in Hollywood, where no one uses real names anyway. Today, they enjoy unofficially calling themselves the Datskeefers.

A QUICKIE GUIDE TO CHANGING YOUR NAME

If you're taking his name

Several online services, like MissNowMrs.com and Marriage Name Change (each is \$30), simplify the process. Answer a few questions and the site will fill out all the forms (Social Security, passport, driver's license, et cetera). All you have to do is print, sign, and send.

If your fiancé's changing his name

If you live in certain states (like California, Georgia, Iowa, Massachusetts, and New York), you can just include his new name on the marriage license. But in most states, you have to physically appear at your county clerk's office and get a court order, and he has to run a newspaper ad announcing his name change to prove he's not ducking taxes, an arrest warrant, or debts. Legalzoom.com can help you through the process.

If you're blending or creating a new name

You'll have to petition the court. The exact logistics vary by state, but you'll file for a court order, most likely from the county clerk.

If you're undecided

Go to marriednamegame.com and take the online quiz. Answer questions about your dress, what state you're in, and a few other personal details and it'll tell you whether you'll be happier keeping your maiden name, taking his, or hyphenating. Brides staffers found it remarkably accurate.

*Some names have been changed.