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Why do brides change their names after marriage?

88 percent of women take husbands' last names, study shows

By Vikki Ortiz

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The marriage proposal was tongue-twistingly tender: Molly Antos' boyfriend hand-painted a pair of shoes with the words "Marry Me Molly" and set them in the window of a Wicker Park boutique for her to discover as they strolled by together.

Despite the amorous alliteration, Antos is not inclined to become Molly Morey when she marries Dan Morey next year.

"I sort of think it sounds like a butter company," says Antos of Arlington Heights, who plans to use the name Molly Antos Morey. Antos' compromise has become a popular choice for brides today, as studies show women are still overwhelmingly opting to take their husband's last names either completely or in some variation. In a survey of 18,000 couples married last year, 88 percent of women reported changing their names, said Rebecca Dolgin, executive editor of theknot.com, a popular wedding Web site.



The practice may feel like an affront to women who endured years of raised eyebrows when they kept their names as a statement of equality. But modern brides and those who study women's issues say it may actually be a celebration of strides women have made since the 1970s and early 1980s.

"I think that there was a point in time where women felt very strongly that they had to [keep their names] to assert their feminist leanings or to say that women are equal to men," Dolgin said. "Now, women are a little more comfortable and it's not as threatening to them."

Days after Kerianne Moore returned from her honeymoon last month, she drove to the Department of Motor Vehicles and the Social Security office to shed her maiden name, Obrachta. The change will be an adjustment since for years she's been known as "Miss O." at the West Chicago middle school where she works.

But Moore, 27, said she sees her decision to change her name as a move that shows she has grown up and is setting forth on new adventures. "I am independent and I'm doing this," she said. "You're branching out and you're doing your own thing and you're joining yourself and another family."

Family was a major factor in Katie Smith's decision to change her name after she got married last year. While she did give up a name she liked -- Kozak -- she says she was happy to do so if it sent a message of cohesiveness. The couple now have a daughter, Maddie, who is 5 months old.

"I think we still have our independence, but we hold family values a lot higher than we used to," said Smith, 30, of Aurora. "I'm still a Kozak under it all."

Prudence Moylan, graduate program director for women's studies and gender studies at Loyola University, said although it is no longer shocking in today's society to learn a woman kept her last name, the tendency has lost much momentum over the years. Former Oak Forest Mayor JoAnn Kelly said that when she decided to keep her maiden name about 27 years ago, it was because "at that point in my life, I had already established myself in business, was close to finishing my advanced degree and just decided Kelly is a nice, easy name that I identified with."

Yet she doesn't fault young women today for taking their husbands' names. In some ways, she feels proudly responsible.

"Because of what was done 30 years ago, I think that the women nowadays, they're not thinking about the reasons we were thinking about," Kelly said. "I was often the first woman that was hired in a position that only men had before. Those doors are open now, which is good."

Moylan sees modern brides' decisions to take their husbands' names more as tradition winning out, or, at the very least, women acknowledging that a stance on name change is not the most effective way to fight for equality.

The high number of women opting to change their names surprised Robyn Bruns, 35, of Glenview when she opened Red Letter Event Planning five years ago. But her clients tell Bruns the idea of keeping their names as a statement seems passe. Others say they chose the switch because they prefer their husband's last name.

Rema Elian, 30, of Chicago is excited to make the change and thinks it will allow her and the man she married July 18 to begin thinking of themselves as a new family. But since returning from her honeymoon in Italy and diving back into her advertising job, she hasn't had time to make it official.

"[My husband] has asked me, 'When are you changing your name?' I think he's anxious for me to be a Waugh, which is cute," Elian said. "My response is, 'Well, I have a million other things to do before I do -- but I'll get around to it,' which I will."

For Antos, 24, who will walk down the aisle next October, changing her name doesn't carry much weighty sociological meaning.

"For me, the name-change thing was more practical than anything," she said.

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