Maiden Names in a Patriarchal Society: A Review

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Abstract

This study conducted in a society in Delhi, India, investigated the surname practices of women following marriage. A survey of 30 married women revealed that a significant number preferred to retain their original surname (17 out of 30), particularly those with higher levels of education. Contrary to traditional expectations, the decision to maintain their surname did not adversely affect their societal image within this community. Furthermore, a literature review of seven academic papers from diverse global contexts highlighted varying cultural attitudes and practices regarding women's surname changes after marriage. These findings underscore a global trend towards greater autonomy and choice for women in defining their identities within marital relationships, influenced significantly by educational attainment and societal perceptions.

Introduction
Historical Origins

The transmission of a father's surname to children began in France around the year 1000 and in England around the time of the Norman conquest in 1066. However, this practice did not become widespread in England until the reign of Edward II (1307–1327). English women began commonly adopting their husbands' surnames in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Embleton and King 1984), around the same time or shortly after the custom of transmitting the father's surname to children became prevalent. Before this, the common practice in England was patronymy, where children's first names indicated their father's identity (e.g., by attaching a suffix to the father's first name or using 'son of' or similar prefixes) (Camden and Philipot 1637). On its face, patronymy is a form of patrilineal descent reckoning, though it identifies only one member of the patriline—the father [5].

Although surname transmission from father to child is not universally practiced, a global survey of descent reckoning types reveals that patrilineal societies constitute more than twice as many (42%) as matrilineal societies (20%). The remaining societies practice forms of bilateral descent (from both maternal and paternal sides: 36%) or bilineal descent (using both matrilineal and patrilineal lines). In patrilineal societies, women are symbolically transferred from their natal families to their husbands' families (Murdock 1949). These practices have been predominant across a majority of human societies and have encompassed a larger number of individuals, as many nation-states and colonial powers adhere to patrilineal systems, whereas matrilineal societies tend to be smaller in scale.

Women who choose not to change their surname after marriage often find themselves navigating a variety of social attitudes and expectations. Traditionally, in many cultures, a woman adopting her husband's surname has been seen as a symbolic gesture of unity and belonging within the family unit. However, as

societal norms evolve and women increasingly assert their individual identities, more women are opting to retain their birth surname after marriage.

One way in which women who retain their surname may be treated differently is through societal perceptions of their commitment to marriage and family. Some may view a woman keeping her surname as a sign of prioritizing her identity over her marital status or family unity. This can lead to assumptions or stereotypes about her values or intentions within her marriage.

In professional settings, women who keep their surname may encounter confusion or assumptions regarding their marital status or family roles. Colleagues or clients may mistakenly address them using their husband's surname or inquire about their decision not to change it, which can be intrusive and uncomfortable.

Within familial and social circles, reactions can vary widely. Some relatives and friends may be supportive and respect the woman's decision, recognizing her right to maintain her identity. However, others, particularly those with more traditional beliefs, may question or criticize her choice, viewing it as unconventional or disrespectful to marital traditions.

In legal and administrative contexts, women who retain their surname may face challenges related to official documentation, especially if they reside in regions where the assumption is that a woman will take her husband's surname upon marriage. This can lead to administrative hurdles, such as explaining or justifying their decision on forms and official records.

On a personal level, women who keep their surname may feel empowered by maintaining a strong connection to their own family history and identity. They may see their decision as a reflection of their independence and equality within their marriage, asserting their right to make choices that align with their personal values.

Literature Review

Jawahar Alwedinani (2017). This paper explores the impact of marriage on the education of Saudi women. Most participants believe that marriage is as significant as education and careers. According to interviews, some female students and lecturers support traditional roles for women, viewing the home as a woman's natural place and housewifery as a fundamental role. They see a woman who supports her husband and cares for her children as contributing more to the community than if she were working. These views reflect internalized gender roles. While many female participants agree on the importance of motherhood, their actions differ when choosing between studies and marriage. The responses indicate that motherhood and having children are serious decisions, but unlike in the past, women no longer focus solely on marriage and children, making marriage a lesser priority.

Participants were categorized into three groups based on their attitudes toward marriage. Despite most having internalized traditional marriage norms, their attitudes vary significantly, showing resistance or negotiation with patriarchal systems. The first group consists of women who resist the patriarchal system by asserting their Islamic rights, including seeking divorce to pursue their education. The second group delays marriage until after university graduation to negotiate with patriarchal influences. The third group complies with patriarchal norms without negotiation, marrying young and allowing their husbands' influence over their education. This group typically chooses traditional subjects like education to maximize marriage prospects and avoids professions requiring evening shifts, such as nursing or medicine [1].

Sharifa Sultana et al. (2018). This paper investigates the opportunities and challenges involved in designing technologies to support low-income rural women in Bangladesh. Through a qualitative, empirical study involving 90 participants, we uncover systemic everyday challenges faced by these women, providing a context for potential technology design. We explore how technology currently affects women's lives, sometimes reinforcing their subservient societal roles and sometimes being used by women to gain some agency. The insights from our participants about technology's role in their lives offer valuable guidance for HCI researchers on what might be appropriate to design for them. We demonstrate how common HCI research and design strategies may not fit as well as expected into the lives of rural women, suggesting possible alternative design directions and discussing the ethical and pragmatic trade-offs involved. Our contribution is not to "solve" the problem of designing for low-income rural women but to broaden the HCI community's understanding of technology design within deeply patriarchal societies [2].

Ashling Sheehan (2017). The evolving role of women in Irish society has garnered considerable attention in sociology literature, yet it remains underexplored in the field of marketing. This paper aims to synthesize existing research and literature to outline the significant changes in the role of women in Irish society since the 1920s, emphasizing their impact on consumer behavior patterns in Ireland. The paper focuses on key milestones in the transformation of women's roles, including their increased participation in the labor force, Ireland's economic growth since the mid-1990s, and the current economic recession. These changes provide the context for the development of female consumer patterns in Ireland, which are discussed under themes such as changing attitudes towards family life, representations of women in the media, and the impact of the recession [3].

Irshad Reshi (2022). Women's empowerment is a critical issue in today's world, focusing on enhancing women's economic, social, and political power. This literature review offers an overview of the concept of women's empowerment, its historical evolution, and its significance in achieving sustainable development goals. The review highlights the various factors that impede women's empowerment and identifies successful strategies for fostering empowerment, such as education, access to resources, and political participation. It concludes with recommendations for policymakers, civil society organizations, and researchers to further the cause of women's empowerment [4].

Melanie MacEacheron (2016). As of the time of writing, women in the U.S.A. have had the legal right to choose not to change their marital surname for 30-40 years. Similarly, the options of surname retention and hyphenation have been prominent in Canada for about the same duration. This article reviews and contextualizes the options, practices, and history of women's marital surname retention/change in these regions, as well as the implications for children's receipt of maternal and/or paternal surnames. It also examines each primary quantitative finding from all peer-reviewed articles published on the topic. The primary goal of this article is to provide evidence that the practice of surname change is ultimately intended to enhance patrilineal descent reckoning—the tracing of familial origins predominantly or solely through the male line (Murdock 1949)—thereby increasing wives' ability to secure investment from their husbands and in-laws for themselves and their children [5]

Dilsah Kartal (2020). According to Article 187 of the Turkish Civil Code, a married woman is required to change her surname upon marriage, though she is allowed to keep her own surname before her husband's surname. This rule conflicts with both the Turkish Constitution and international agreements to which Turkey is a party. In recent years, Turkish courts have deemed Article 187 effectively void in practice, although no formal amendment has been made to the article. Despite the courts' stance, administrative authorities continue to enforce Article 187. Consequently, a woman who wishes to retain her surname

must file a lawsuit to exercise this right. Without an amendment to Article 187, this issue remains unresolved. While there have been amendment proposals, none have been satisfactory [6].

Marcia Seide (2022). This article presents a systematic review of the literature investigating the nature of primary official personal names in Brazilian Portuguese and their epistemological research. A total of 15 articles were selected from a list of 44 Onomastics publications from 2011 to 2021. The findings reveal significant etymological diversity in both surnames and first names. In Brazil, except for names of indigenous people and descendants of slaves, there is a correlation between the ethnicity of ancestors and the etymology of surnames. Two types of first names are identified: conventional names, which are integrated into the Brazilian repertoire during a specific period, chosen in accordance with local customs and linked to religious or national traditions, and unconventional names, which deviate from the former and are perceived as unique and distinctive. Over 25% of the studies analyze two or more linguistic levels, including etymological, orthographic, and morphological aspects. Most studies are local in scope and consider not only linguistic features but also the social and historical contexts of the data analyzed [7].
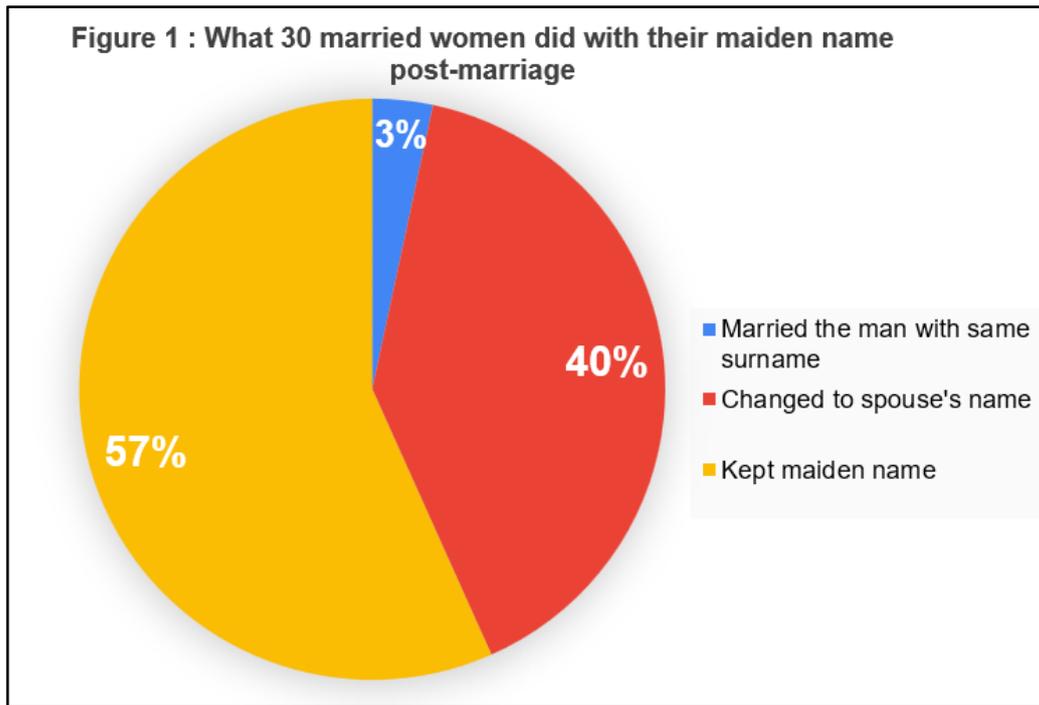
Gerald (2018). Ideally, personal names reflect the ideology, beliefs, values, and norms of the bearers, embodying their social identity. The current wave of Westernization sweeping across Africa, particularly the Igbo society, has influenced all aspects of its culture, including naming conventions. Some names that were once considered nicknames have now become personal names, warranting scholarly investigation. The researcher argues that some current naming trends strip names of their cultural, social, religious, and political relevance, erasing the identity of the bearers, while others violate traditional Igbo naming norms. To provide a basis for comparison, the researcher compiled regular and trending Igbo names from personal contacts in Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria, as well as from social media, television and radio broadcasts, the internet, and print media for descriptive analysis. Interviews were also conducted to gain deeper insights from the name bearers about the motivation behind their names. It was observed that some Igbo names no longer have meaningful connections with their derivatives, while others have undergone various levels of Westernization. It is recommended that awareness campaigns be conducted to educate people on the interconnectedness of names, language, culture, and identity, encouraging them to prioritize meaningfulness and relevance over fashion in personal naming [8].

Survey Methodology

In a recent survey conducted within a society in Noida-Delhi, India, the focus was on understanding the naming practices of women after marriage. 80 people participated in the survey, of which 48 were women and 32 were men. 30 married women participated in the survey, revealing various choices regarding their surnames. The survey aimed to understand how societal attitudes towards maiden names vary according to age, gender, marital status, and educational backgrounds; as well as married women's experiences regarding their decisions about their maiden names.
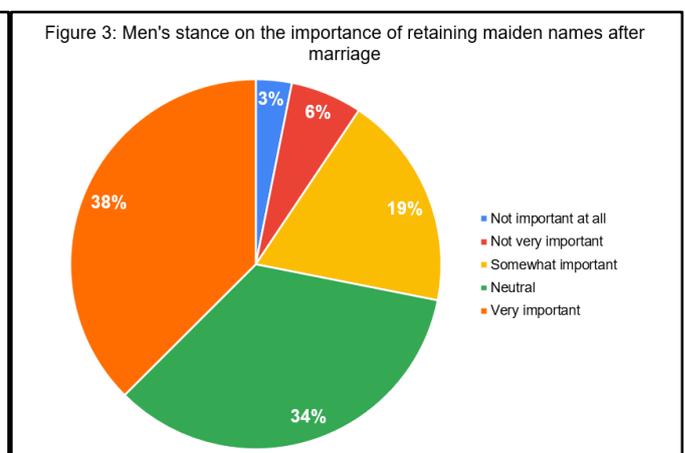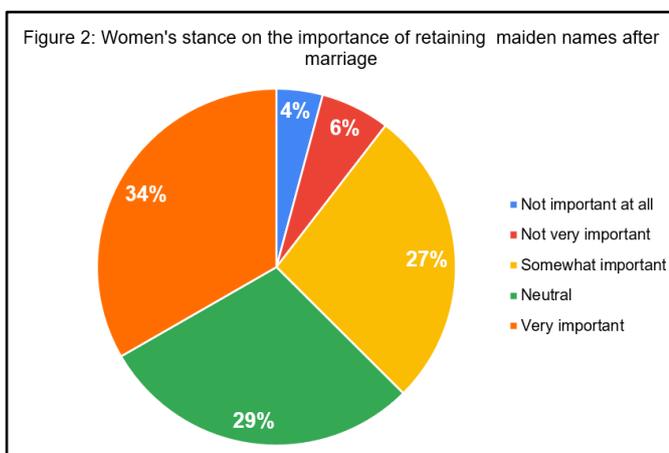
Results and discussions

Of the total respondents, seventeen women opted to retain their original surname after marriage, while the remaining thirteen chose to change it to their husband's surname. This distribution highlights a significant portion of women in the community who prioritize maintaining their individual identity through their surname, reflecting a growing trend towards personal choice and autonomy in marital naming traditions.

Figure 1 : What 30 married women did with their maiden name post-marriage

- Married the man with same surname — 3%
- Changed to spouse's name — 40%
- Kept maiden name — 57%

4 out of these 17 women experienced judgment or criticism for choosing to keep their maiden name; whereas the 12 women who changed their surname after marriage didn't face any judgment or criticism regarding their decision.

11 out of the 30 married women did not consider keeping their maiden names after marriage, and the common reason was tradition. The 19 married women who considered keeping their maiden names cited identity preservation and personal preference as the reason for doing so.

When all 80 respondents were asked about how important they believe it is for individuals to retain their maiden names after marriage, most of them think it is at least of some importance. Almost one-third of the respondents chose to remain neutral, whereas a very small percentage believes it is not very important to retain maiden names after marriage.

Figure 2: Women's stance on the importance of retaining maiden names after marriage

- Not important at all — 4%
- Not very important — 6%
- Somewhat important — 27%
- Neutral — 29%
- Very important — 34%

Figure 3: Men's stance on the importance of retaining maiden names after marriage

- Not important at all — 3%
- Not very important — 6%
- Somewhat important — 19%
- Neutral — 34%
- Very important — 38%

Of the 80 respondents, 62 see the change in societal attitudes towards maiden names in a positive light, 13 maintain a neutral stance and 5 are unsure about how to perceive these changes.

Figure 4: the perception of the respondents on the change in societal attitudes towards maiden names in recent years
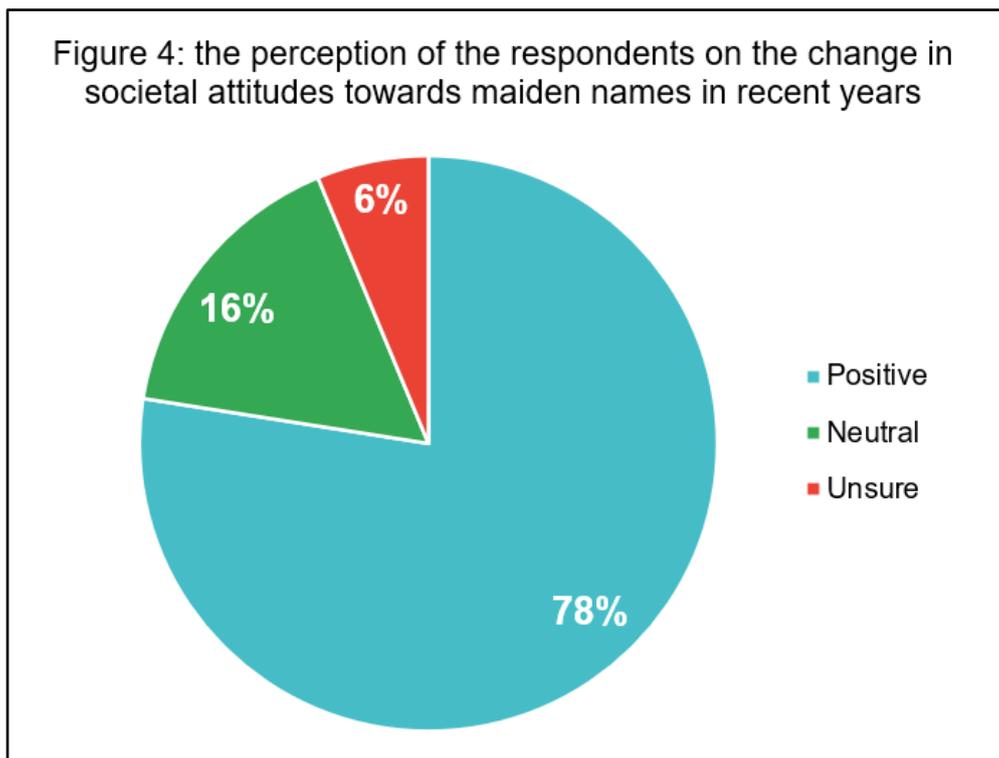
Conclusion

While attitudes towards women who retain their surname after marriage are gradually evolving towards greater acceptance and understanding, they can still encounter varying degrees of scrutiny, judgment, or inconvenience in different aspects of their lives. Ultimately, the decision to change or retain one's surname after marriage is deeply personal and should be respected as a choice that reflects individual values and preferences.

Through the survey conducted in this society in India, alongside a review of literature on naming practices, a clear trend emerges: societies worldwide are evolving in their attitudes towards women's choices regarding surname changes after marriage. This shift reflects a broader movement towards granting women greater autonomy and agency in deciding how they wish to be identified within marital relationships. Increasingly, societal norms are encouraging women to prioritize their education, careers, and personal development before considering marriage, thereby empowering them to make informed decisions about their identities and roles. This cultural evolution signifies a growing recognition of women's rights to self-determination and underscores the importance of individual achievements and aspirations in shaping societal perceptions. As these shifts continue, more women will likely feel supported in asserting their identities both within and beyond the institution of marriage, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable society overall.

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