



Credit: Eli S. Burakian,
Dartmouth College

A scientist by any other name

Many women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) need to make decisions about marital name change, and have to consider how this might affect their publication record and future career. Mentorship that considers race, ethnicity, culture, religion and parenting, as well as a centralized system to dynamically and retroactively streamline name change, will promote agency and choice for women navigating STEM careers, writes Bala Chaudhary.

I will never forget the day that science chose my name. I was an early-career researcher, visiting the lab of a senior male scientist to learn new skills, and had just gotten engaged. I was bubbling with excitement over the possibilities — the future of my career in science and now a future with my soul mate. In passing, the senior male scientist made a comment about a prominent woman scientist in our field. “How many names does she have? It’s so confusing! I can’t keep track!”, he said. I shrunk back and grew quiet. The scientist in question had published some papers using her maiden name and others using her married name. I too had already published with my maiden name and was beginning to consider, similar to many women, what name I would choose after marriage. I was shocked that such a common phenomenon for women could be viewed negatively in academic science. I decided that to minimize any potential negative effects on my career, I would not change my name after marriage. Years later, I do not regret my decision. Yet I do wish I had made the choice about this important component of my personal and professional identity, not in fear, but instead solely on my own terms.

Women, whether in same-sex or heterosexual relationships, still predominantly make decisions regarding marital name change¹. In science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields, as the proportion of female researchers rises, more women are considering the potential effects of marital name change on their careers. The stakes are high, as relationship status and name discrimination contribute to gender² and racial³ inequities in faculty hiring. The shifting demographics of students and a greater proportion of STEM undergraduates engaging in research and publishing has also led to more scientists questioning decisions around name changes. Dual-scientist couples considering sharing a last name may wonder about gendered assessments of their contributions to work. Women occasionally ask for advice on this topic

using social-media platforms such as Twitter. Community members chime in with myriad options: keep your name, change your name, hyphenate, add a middle name, couples choose a new name, keep separate personal and legal names, and so on. There is no single correct approach for this personal decision, so online discussions and testimonials⁴ are invaluable resources for women with few immediate role models.

Mentorship to navigate marital name change is rare and generally lacks nuance with respect to race, ethnicity and culture. Names signal racial, ethnic, religious or cultural aspects of identity that one may not want to disclose in a professional setting. I have experienced an unusual amount of curiosity regarding the race of my partner from colleagues. “Is your husband white?” I believe this stems from the hypervisibility of women of colour and an unconscious desire to categorize and evaluate my proximity to whiteness. Had I taken my partner’s name, personal details about the racial makeup of my family would be disclosed on my publications and grant applications, a factor that I never considered early in my career. Furthermore, western-centric views omit important cultural marriage norms regarding names that women scientists may wish to observe, but feel pressured to abandon by white feminist perspectives. For example, women of colour may be perceived as anti-feminist by choosing to change their name with marriage in an effort to uphold sacred family or cultural traditions.

Women scientists who have children also face decisions regarding whether or not they will share a last name with their children. In some cultures — for example, Latin America and Iceland — this is a moot point as children’s last names are derived from parents’ names, and certain countries have strict laws governing naming conventions for children. I do not share a last name with my children and it has never negatively impacted cohesion or identity within my family. However, because my children are biracial, my motherhood is often questioned by others. “Are they really your kids? They don’t

look like you.” I carry more documentation proving my motherhood than I would if I shared a last name with my children. This scenario is certainly not unique to women in STEM, but it reflects another important consideration, grounded in intersectional identity, that affects complex decisions facing women who are navigating personal and professional lives in science.

As mentors, we can do better when it comes to advising mentees about marital name change in a way that is culturally competent and incorporates important components of identity such as race, ethnicity, religion and parenting. STEM leaders can work to create systems that accommodate the widely practiced behaviour of name change without negative impacts on women. Recent calls⁵ to adopt a single centralized name-change system through ORCID iD in support of transgender researchers would also benefit scientists considering name changes because of relationship status. Automatically updating author name changes on past publications makes it easier to track and assess a body of work over the span of one’s entire career.

Names are central to our identities and should be decided by personal choice, not outdated science conventions. □

V. Bala Chaudhary

Department of Environmental Studies, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH, USA.

✉ e-mail: Bala.Chaudhary@dartmouth.edu

Published online: 4 March 2022
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41564-022-01067-2>

References

1. Pilcher, J. *Sex Roles* 77, 812–822 (2017).
2. Rivera, L. A. *Am. Sociol. Rev.* 82, 1111–1138 (2017).
3. Bartkoski, T., Lynch, E., Witt, C. & Rudolph, C. *Personnel Assess. Decisions* 4, 1 (2018).
4. Charlton-Robb, K., Draper, T. & Caron, V. How three scientists navigated the personal and career implications of a name change with marriage. *The Conversation* <https://go.nature.com/3JC8Y0J> (29 April 2019).
5. Gaskins, L. C. & McClain, C. R. *PLoS Biol.* 19, e3001104 (2021).

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.