



SARAH LANG



Mr & Mrs

We're a liberal country, writes Sarah Lang, so why do so many women take their husband's name and abandon their own after marriage?

Since I got married five years ago, I've had too much mail addressed to 'Michael and Sarah Henry' and even 'Mr and Mrs Michael Henry'. I harrumph and talk about returning it to sender with 'Sarah Henry' highlighted and 'no one of that name at this address'. But most of the senders have been elderly relatives or family friends, so I figured it was just a generational thing (and a bit mean to return Christmas cards).

"They're out of touch with our generation," I grumbled to my husband, who finds it funny how riled I get. "I mean, how many women actually change their name nowadays?"

A lot. In January, I scrolled through my Facebook friends to invite them to the local incarnation of the Women's March on Washington. Not until then did I realise how many of my married female friends and acquaintances had taken their husbands' names. Seventeen, in fact. Five had kept their own; mostly journalists with known bylines. I was kind of shocked at the numbers, especially in my admittedly liberal social circle.

Various US surveys show that around four in five women still change their names, and it's thought to be about the same here. I kind of get that in America, where religion and conservatism are deeply ingrained, but it surprises me in New Zealand. Yes, every woman should have the choice as to whether to change her name. But I can't help wondering why you would. Many say it's because they want the same name as their kids. But will children really care? Will it really cause that much confusion at school? And if it's

about the family unit sharing a surname, why aren't more men changing their names? Actually, I know one who did, and I know people have laughed about it as though it's emasculating.

I've been asked more than once why I didn't change my name.

It's not just that I'm known professionally by my byline, and that Slang Limited makes a punny business name. It's not just that 'Sarah Henry' is the name of NEXT's editorial director. It's not just that it would be a logistical hassle. It's mainly that I believe men and women are equals. Even if my last name was Hussy, I think I'd keep it on principle.

And my name's part of me. My identity. It's the name on my old exercise books, my embarrassing diaries, my degrees. Sarah Henry just isn't me – and no, I don't want to try it for size and grow into it, as someone suggested.

Someone else once asked why I bothered getting married, if I wasn't changing my name. I replied calmly. Because, to me, marriage is a once-in-a-lifetime (we hope) opportunity to recognise a partnership. An equal partnership. (Oh, and to have a great party.) At our wedding, I asked the celebrant to say "you may now kiss the groom" mainly to get a laugh, but also to draw attention to gendered social norms that still run deep. □

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Should more women keep their names when they get married?

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