

Which name upon marriage? Family names of women in Finland

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Abstract

In Finland, married women were made subject to the legal obligation to use their husband's family name from Marriage Act 1930 to the new, revised Family Names Act 1985. At the latest during the period the patriarchal system to choose a family name upon marriage was adopted in the whole country. After the new Names Act – which allowed both spouses also to keep their own family name as such - entered into force, 92.1% of the women still chose to adopt the husband's name as their common family name as such or with their maiden name. The share of married couples to choose just the husband's name was 85.1%. Until 2009, the new family name law led to certain tendencies where choosing the husband's family name as the exclusive family name diminished by more than 16 percent points and keeping one's own family name increased by over 15 percent points. In 2010, there was a weak turn to choosing husband's name again at the expense of keeping one's own family name but also a gradual new trend where a couple to be married wishes to choose an entirely new name common to both spouses.

One of last year's (2010) topical debates in the Finnish media was which name women choose once they get married: do they choose to keep their maiden name as such, or do they take their husband's family name either as such or with their maiden name as a double-barrelled name – and is there a specific tendency that can be detected? Choosing the husband's family name is often motivated by saying that it is an established way of acting, more romantic, or that all the family members should have a common name. Further, the idea that using the husband's family name in marriage is an “ancient tradition” seems to persist. Especially in the countryside, there may also be strong pressure from the family to choose the husband's name: it is considered important that the land property are inherited within one family and symbolized by a family carrying the same family name.

Regulation on women's family names in Finland

Finland's first Family Names Act was issued in 1920. According to it everyone should use a permanent family name. Those who did not have a family name at the time would have to acquire one within a year. Since the question about women's family names could not be solved during the parliamentary handling of the bill, it was decided that the issue should be left to the forthcoming Marriage Act. Regarding the wife's family name, it was only stated in the first law on family names that a wife would be entitled to her husband's family name, and that she would still be entitled to it after a divorce if she was raising children from that marriage or if agreed with the husband otherwise.

The Marriage Act was laid down in 1929. It provided that a wife should carry her husband's family name either as such or as combined with her own family name. Such double-barrelled and hyphenated names, however, were not passed on to the following generations.

Previous use of surnames

Thus, it was only from 1930 onwards that married women were made subject to the legal obligation to use their husband's family name. The previous use of family names had to do, on the one hand, with the family name system of the estate society and, on the other hand,

with the degree of independency a woman had as a spouse and widow. Among the nobility, women's maiden names were considered important even in marriage as markers of their own families and the consequent rights of inheritance, as well as supporters of the husbands' position. (Mäkelä-Alitalo 1999; Paikkala 2004: 559) The trend towards adopting the husband's family name as the surname of both spouses started in the Finnish upper estates in the 18th century – i.e. among the nobility, the clergy, and the bourgeoisie – apparently following a European model (Blomqvist 1993: 208; Paikkala 1989: 14 and 1997: 117; Valtavuo-Pfeifer 1996: 34). Among the peasantry, there were very few instances of the use of the husband's family name prior to the middle of the 19th century; and in those cases, the husband's family name was nearest used by widows once they remarried.

In practice, it was the hierarchy and ownership relations prevalent in society that led wives to adopt their husband's name. The 1713 rank order defined the hierarchical positions between the officers and public offices. Following these principles, the common law on marriage of 1734 provided that women should follow their husband's estate and class. Although the legislation only referred to “house and estate”, instead of mentioning the wife's family name, this pair of concepts was soon considered to include even the family name (Mäkelä-Alitalo 1999). For example, as early as in the 1747 rank order of the postil of Johan Wegelius, vicar of Oulu, it was mentioned that wives should be called by their husband's surnames.

Among Finnish peasantry, however, a woman's family name was determined according to whether she was part of the eastern Finnish peasantry or whether she came from the western Finnish regions, where patronyms and house names were used instead of family names. In Eastern Finland, daughters inherited their family names from their father and retained them even after they got married; this tradition continued up to the early years of the 20th century in certain areas. – In contrast, in Western Finland, men and women who did not belong to any estate (e.g. hired workers) or who belonged to peasantry, did not use family names at all. It often happened that the house name - surname they were given was the name of the house they were living in or the name of the house in which they had been born. In the case of women whose families used a family name because of a change in their social position (e.g. because of starting school education), the name that was registered for them was that of their father's or brother's – not their husband's.

New Names Act 1985

The obligation to use the husband's family name was abolished in Finland in 1986. One year before, a new Names Act had been passed, entitling the spouses to adopt the name of either spouse either as such or combined with one's own family name – i.e. as a double-barrelled name – or to keep their own family name as such.

MARRIAGE	CHILD'S FAMILY NAME
Ville Virta ∞ Liisa Virta	Emma Virta
Ville Lumo ∞ Liisa Lumo	Emma Lumo
Ville Virta ∞ Liisa Lumo-Virta	Emma Virta
Ville Virta-Lumo ∞ Liisa Lumo	Emma Lumo
Ville Virta ∞ Liisa Lumo	Emma Virta or Emma Lumo
(if the parents do not agree on the child's name, the child will be given the mother's family name.)	

Figure 1. Family name options in marriage since 1986.
Fictitious persons Mr. *Ville Virta* and Ms. *Liisa Lumo* as examples.

The law thus abolished the wife's obligation to adopt her husband's family name, laid down

by the Marriage Act; in fact, the juridical obligation was only in force for 56 years.

Choosing family names in marriage after the new name legislation

The Finnish population registering system was made uniform in the middle of the 1960s, as the digital population register was created. The digital register enables the compilation of various statistics for different research needs. Thus, the database of the Population Register Centre provides information on, e.g., the choice of family names by married couples every year since 1986, with the exception of three years (1999-2001). I have drafted the following figures on the basis of those statistics.

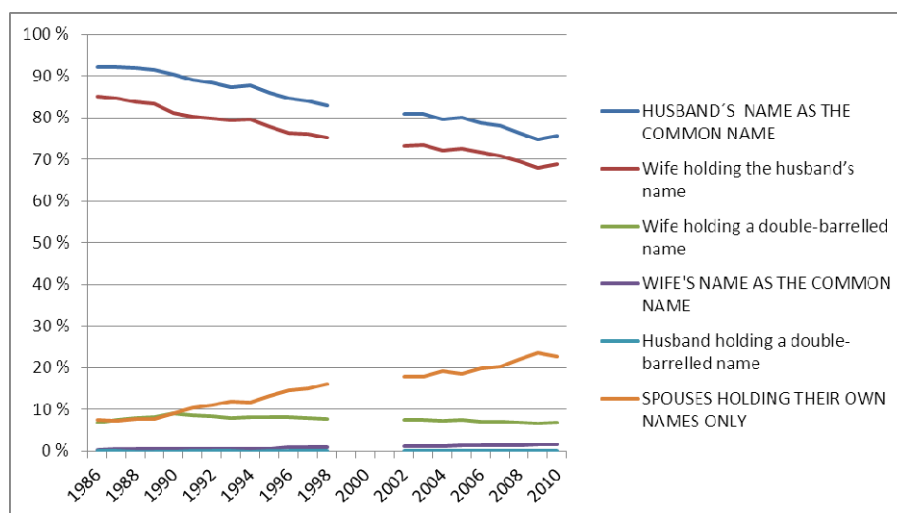


Figure 2. Choice of family name in marriage 1986-2010

The situation at the end of the year 1986 is crucial, since it reflects clearly the practice coined during the previous patriarchal family name system. After the new Names Act entered into force, 92.1% of the spouses still chose to adopt the husband's name as their common family name. The share of married couples to choose just the husband's name was 85.1%. Double-barrelled names were chosen by 7.0% of women. In Finland, double barrelled names refer to names consisting of two family names combined by a dash, e.g., *Sibelius-Luhtala*. Such names are not passed on to the children. As for marriages where both spouses decided to keep their own family names, their share went up to 7.5%.

The first clear turning point could be detected in 1990. It was then that women's choosing double-barrelled names reached its peak, covering up to 9.1% of all married women; after that it took a slight downward turn again. At the same time, we can see an opposite curve in keeping one's own family name.

It seems evident that this change was due to a desire to keep one's own family name; the following year (1991), up to 10.4% of women decided to keep their maiden names. Unfortunately, there are no regional statistics available; however, in general it can be said that keeping one's own family name has been more popular in cities and among more educated women who have made their own careers than it has been with country people. We could presume that a reason for the 1990 change was that during the previous five years that had passed since the law had been enacted, this new freedom of choice had become more widely known, which added to people's courage to make new choices.

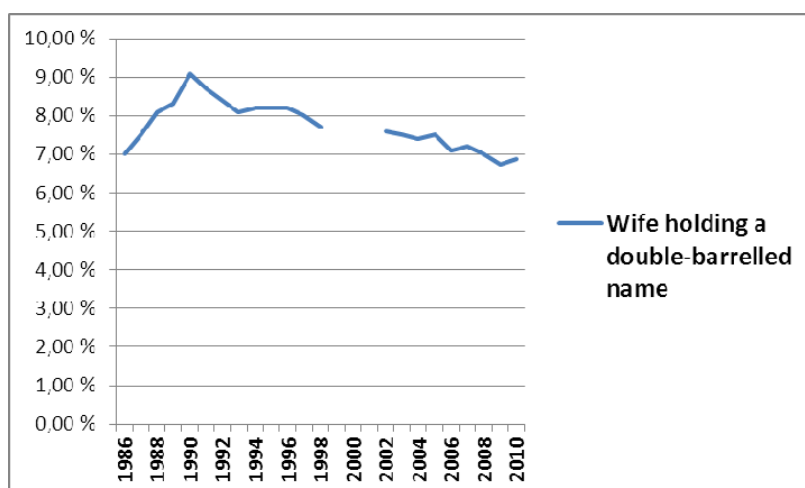


Figure 3. Women's choice of double-barrelled names in marriage from 1986 to 2010.

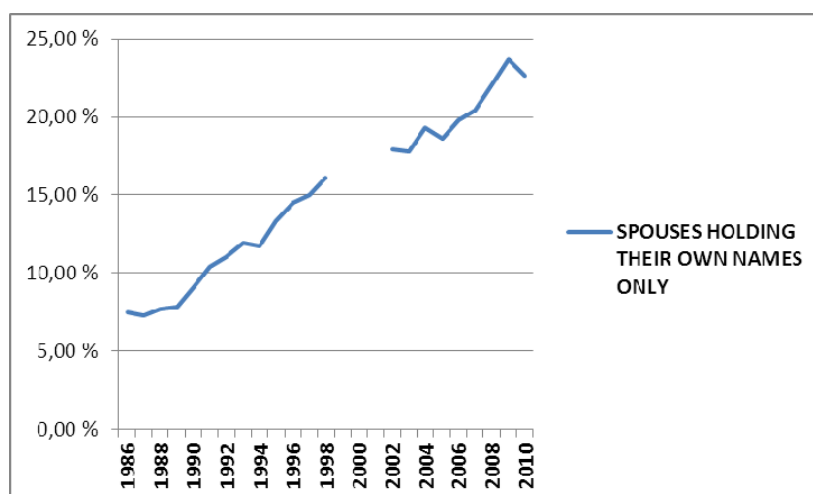


Figure 4. Keeping one's own family name in marriage 1986-2010.

The new family name law led to certain tendencies that could be seen clearly until 2009: firstly: Choosing the husband's family name as the exclusive family name diminished by more than 16 percent points; secondly: women's choice of double-barrelled names diminished only slightly, i.e. 0.1 percent points; thirdly: keeping one's own family name increased by over 15 percent points; and finally: marriages where the wife's name was adopted as the common name increased by 1.2 percent points.

This figure does, in fact, reflect most accurately the change that has taken place in the choice of family names by women, since the predominant practice still is that the husband's name is chosen as the common name exclusively.

The year 2010 downward turn

There was a slight turn in women's family names in the 2010 statistics: choosing the husband's name as such or in addition to the wife's own name took a slight upward curve, whereas the decision to keep just one's own family name fell to a respective degree, i.e. by one percent point.

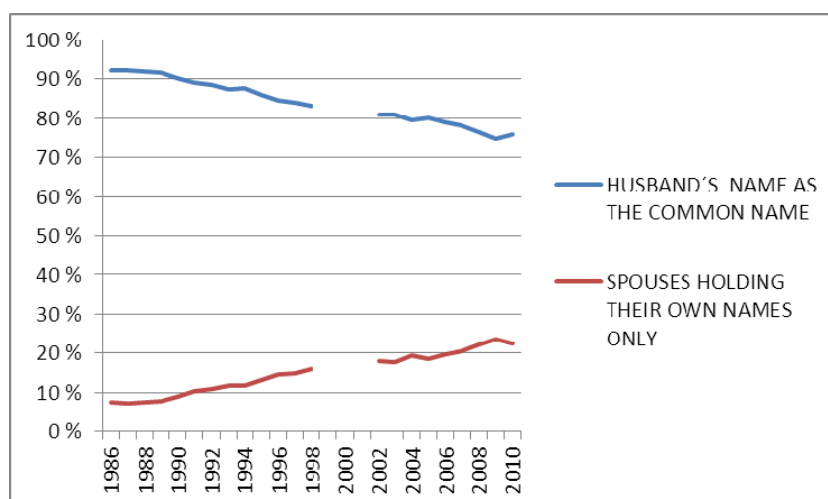


Figure 5. Women holding the husband's name as such or as a combination vs. keeping one's own family name from 1986 to 2010.

The question arises whether such a trend could reflect a change in attitudes towards a more conservative direction, towards the imagined ancient tradition? Could this be part of the same phenomenon as the victory of the conservative True Finns party in the Finnish Parliamentary election of 2011? Be that as it may, we cannot yet say whether the downward turn of 2011 is permanent or temporary as a phenomenon. Namely, an almost similar change took place in 2005, after which there was a return to the previous trend. And, the rise in the share of marriages where the husband's name is chosen as the common family name is also affected by an increase in the number of consensual unions e.g. cohabitations without marriage; thus, the number of couples where both spouses use their own family names is even bigger in reality. All in all, consensual unions are a significant form of families, since slightly more than 21% of all Finnish families are based on them. In 1984, their respective share was less than 10% (Aromaa & Cantell & Jaakkola 1981; Aarnio & Kangas 2010: 236).

Choosing the husband's name

The women who have opted for their husband's name often motivate their choice by tradition and the fact that they want the entire family to have the same name, if they are going to have children. Thus, whilst choosing a common name, it is the husband's name that is chosen, even though the common name could just as well be the wife's family name. In fact, this seems to reflect a patriarchal conception of marriage and the status of the head of the family. This often also has to do with the family's expectations, which may be more old-fashioned especially in the countryside.

- "It's nice to have the same name for the entire family if we have kids. I think my maiden name was much nicer than my present one, but a name's just a name, after all" (KK 2010: 77).
- "I want us to form a family together. And I want that family to have a common name, too." (KK 2010: 77)
- "My husband's name just sounded more beautiful than my former family name. - - I must say that I was terrified at first, too. I've always considered myself a feminist and then I do something that at least almost symbolically means that I become my husband's property." (KK 2010: 77)
- A woman whose maiden name is *Kissa* (en *Cat*) chose her husband's name because "people always hear my name wrong". They only call me by my family name and that doesn't really feel good." (IS 2010: 17)

The fact that choosing the husband's name is so popular reflects the slow changing of certain values in Finnish culture.

Keeping one's own family name

The women who have decided to keep their own names motivate their decision by identity, claiming that it is more practical, or by the fact that their maiden name is rare. Once they have made their own careers using their own names, changing names would mean difficulties in being recognized; and they would also need to obtain new identity documents, e.g., driver's license, passport, banking information, etc. The growing number of divorces and reconstituted families has also made people less willing to change their family names:

- "I kept my own name. It is such a major part of my identity that it didn't even occur to me I should change it." (KK 2010: 77)
- "I would have needed a really weighty reason to change my name, tradition wasn't a strong enough reason for me". (KK 2010:77)
- "My parents had gone through some trouble trying to find me a forename that would suit my family name, so I didn't want to change my family name when I got married. I think your name's an important part of your identity". (KK 2010:77)
- "We couldn't come up with a single good reason why either of us should have changed our names [both spouses have rare names]. - - I didn't want Sami to give up his name, which he had already used whilst creating his career. For my part, I've somehow grown attached to my name after I've lived with its good and bad aspects thus far." (KV 2010)

The husband adopts the wife's family name

A smaller, yet slightly increasing number of men have decided to adopt either a double-barrelled name or just their wife's name as their family name.

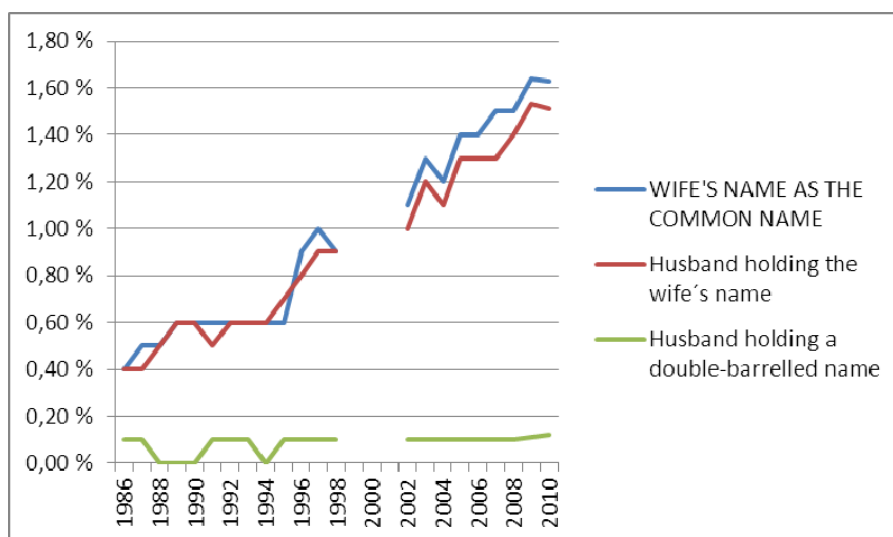


Figure 6. Men holding their wife's name either as such or as a combination.

But when do men accept their wife's name as their own? A couple of men interviewed about this topic said that their spouse's name was rare or that it was suitable as, e.g., an artist name and, at the same time, they considered adopting their wife's name as a conscious feminist statement. One interviewee said: "I'm in harmony with my masculinity and changing my name doesn't make a difference. Some people may, of course, need to stick to these accustomed symbols of masculinity." (Wife's comment: "At any rate it feels good that Ville

took my name. It was beautiful and respectful.”) (KV 2010.) – Some men, in turn, have chosen their wife’s name because they see it as more beautiful or more “elegant” than their own family name.

New common name

In the course of the 21st century, there has been a gradual new trend where a couple to be married wishes to choose an entirely new name common to both spouses. This way, the spouses create an entirely new family, as it were, and the whole family receives a common name – or a dispute over the choice of names can be solved in a compromise, as neither spouse has to “submit to the other”. In such cases, it may happen that the spouses still wish to preserve elements of their own family names, e.g., if the name consists of two parts, it may contain elements from the family names of both spouses, e.g., *Reinikainen* and *Mäkinen* > **Reinimäki** (MN 2010: 8).

Other examples include:

Vaajala ∞ *Höykinpuro* → **Vaajapuro** (fi *vaaja* ‘a pole attached to a fish trap in water’; fi *puro* ‘stream, brook’) (OMN 31 May 2011).

Oravainen (< fi *orava* ‘squirrel’) ∞ *Vainio* → **Oravainio** (fi *ora* ‘thorn’, fi *vainio* ‘field’) (OMN 13 April 2011). *Kinnunen* (ex *Vuorinen*) ∞ *Kuuva* → **Kuuvuori** (fi *kuu* ‘moon’, fi *vuori* ‘mountain’) (OMN 13 April 2011).

A couple may also apply for an entirely new name,

e.g., *Kuosmanen* ja *Helenius* → **Kuuranta** (fi *kuu* ‘moon’, fi *ranta* ‘beach’) (OMN 13 April 2011). *Kannisto* & *Salminen* → **Korkiajärvi** (fi *korkia* ‘high’, fi *järvi* ‘lake’) (OMN 9 September 2010).

However, it is not allowed to choose just any name as the new family name. The previous Family Names Act from 1920 forbade the adoption of family names that were “unidiomatic or inappropriate” (*Laki sukunimestä* 328/1920, 9. §). According to the new Names Act (*Nimilaki* 694/1985, 11. §.) “a new family name shall not be one that is inappropriate or whose use otherwise causes obvious problems. A new family name is **not** acceptable without a specific reason if:

- 1) its form or orthography is contrary to the domestic name practices;
- 2) it is generally used as a forename; or
- 3) it has been formed by combining two family names.”

Consistency with the domestic name practices is evaluated according to the present orthographic norms and the types of family names already in use. A name is considered a combination of family names, as hyphenated surnames, if its both parts can be independent family names and they are combined by a dash. According to this, Mr Reinikainen and Ms Mäkinen would not have been allowed to adopt the name **Reini-Mäki**; however, when the parts are written as one single word **Reinimäki**, it may have been accepted as a new independent entity.

Examples of names that have not been approved:

Ruotsalainen & *Tsukada* applied for the name “*Shinrauha*”; (Japanses *shin* ‘heart’, fi *rauha* ‘peace’; it was not approved; due to the mixing of two languages and as non-consistent with both the Finnish and the Japanese name practices. (OMN 5 May 2010)

Bergholm & Grönkvist applied for the name “Berkvist”; it was not approved, since it was considered unidiomatic, *ber* not being Swedish. Since the name *Bergkvist* (sv *berg* ‘’) already exists, the name could not be approved in that form, either. However, the orthography *Bärkvist* (sv *bär* ‘berry’, sv *kvist* ‘twig, branch’ was approved, in case the spouses wanted to adopt it. (OMN 11 January 2011). - In Finland, Swedish is also an official language and Swedish names are therefore considered to belong to the domestic name practice.

A new common name is applied for by some 30 married couples or couples planning to get married annually. In general, they seem to have been thinking about the names carefully, since most of the suggested names are linguistically correct and nice and natural in content; they often refer to nature as toponyms and may even be idyllic. Only time will tell how these names will affect Finnish family names in general and what their share will be.

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