

EDITORIAL

A wife by another name

Among the many changes that the ruling Democratic Party of Japan is recommending for Japan, one stands out as uniquely personal and important: letting couples choose the names they want to use after marriage. The legal requirement that spouses in Japan use the same surname has long since disappeared in most developed countries. Japan has retained this legality well past its usefulness.

The issue of easier record-keeping, many might suggest, hardly matters when computers can easily record a couple's different surnames. As for confusing the children, if they are brought up that way, they will not have any identity crisis for that reason alone. A family makes up more than just a couple of kanji. Millions of children around the world have parents with different names without damage to their growing psyches.

The change to allow the choice of names removes the burden of a series of difficulties, especially for women. Being required to change one's name is not only a form-filling hassle but also carries the traditional implication of joining the husband's family. If divorce happens, Japanese women are often put in the insulting position of still having to ask their former spouse for his signature on certain documents or to register children fathered by men other than ex-husbands and born within 300 days after divorce. Thus indignity is added to restriction of legal rights.

Giving couples the choice of using the same name or keeping their pre-married names will legalize what is already common practice for many women. Women do not change their workplace name often; nor are they likely to change the name on their *hesokuri*, the

secret bank accounts many women keep. In large cities, couples increasingly live together without formal marriage ties, retaining their own separate names. The only place people really have to change their name is at the city office.

On international rankings of gender equality, Japan is consistently ranked lower than almost every developed country. Giving women, and men, more choice with regard to their names will not instantly rectify economic unfairness and power imbalances, yet it is a good first step. Free choice leads to more free choice. In this day and age, couples should be free to choose which name they want to use.

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