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# Are gender norm violations always perceived negatively? The effects of marital name choice on perceived work and relationship commitments

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Women who keep their surnames after marriage violate the prescriptive stereotype that they should be communal and deferent, while men who change their names violate the stereotype that they should be agentic and individualistic. Drawing on data from a pre-registered survey experiment conducted with a national probability sample in Germany ( $N = 1,899$ ), we test hypotheses derived from the prescriptive stereotype framework and examine whether gender norm violations are evaluated symmetrically for women and men. Our analyses show that men who break marital name norms by changing their surname are perceived to be less committed to their jobs but more committed to their relationships than men who keep their names. Women who break marital name norms by keeping their surnames are perceived as less committed to their relationships, but—unlike men—they are not ‘rewarded’ with higher perceived professional commitment. In fact, name-keeping women are seen as no more committed to their jobs than name-changing women or men. These findings illustrate the persistence of prevailing gender role expectations and suggest that women have less flexibility than men to break gender norms in the family context, while men have less flexibility than women to break gender norms in the workplace context.

## Introduction

When women and men go to the town-hall or the altar to get married, they make important and long-lasting surname choices. Women typically change their surnames upon marriage, while men tend to keep theirs—a pattern that exemplifies widespread gender stereotypes and gender role expectations (Hamilton, Geist, and Powell, 2011). Although these stereotypes and expectations have weakened over the last 20 years, many people still (un)consciously expect women to be caring and communal and men to be agentic and individualistic (Scarborough, Sin, and Risman, 2019; Eagly *et al.*, 2020; Sullivan, Ciociolo, and Moss-Racusin, 2022). These prescriptive stereotypes remain pervasive, shaping expectations about how women and men ought to behave and how they are viewed by others in work and family life (Benard and Correll, 2010; Hipp, 2020, 2025; Lomazzi and Soboleva, 2024). Using the case of marital name choice attitudes, this paper investigates whether gender norm violations play out differently for women and men in different-sex relationships in Germany.

In many Western societies, it is typically women in different-sex relationships who change their names and men who keep theirs (Shafer and Christensen, 2018; Castrén, 2019; Ellingsæter, 2022). Changing your surname upon marriage, and hence giving up an important part of your identity, is commonly viewed as a signal of romantic commitment and deference to your partner (Nugent, 2010; Hamilton *et al.*, 2011). At the same time, however, name-changing may have negative repercussions at work: Name-keeping demonstrates independence and agency and may be taken as a signal of professional commitment and work-related aspirations.

In this paper, we therefore ask: How do gender norm violations in marital name choices affect perceptions of women’s and men’s professional and relationship commitment? Studying the example of violations of marital name choice conventions by women and men, we aim to better understand the broader implications of gender norm violations in the work and family contexts.

While various studies have examined how marital name choices affect women’s perceived relationship commitment, few have examined whether and how

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men's surname choices impact how others perceive men's relationship commitment, and even fewer have considered how marital name choice may affect evaluations of women and men at work. Research based on survey experiments in the United States has predominantly shown that women who change their surnames upon marriage are perceived to be more committed to their relationships than women who keep their names (Etaugh *et al.*, 1999; Robnett *et al.*, 2016; Kelley, 2023). In contrast, studies examining the effects of men's marital name choice on their perceived relationship commitment yielded mixed results (Forbes *et al.*, 2002; Kelley, 2023). Studies on the effects of marital name choices on professional evaluations are also inconclusive. Research examining perceptions of women's professional commitment has variously found that breaking marital name norms has a positive impact (Etaugh *et al.*, 1999), a negative impact (Stefanova, Latu, and Taylor, 2023), and no impact (Wofford and Knotts, 2020). Likewise, research on perceptions of men's professional commitment based on their marital name decisions has also delivered mixed results (Forbes *et al.*, 2002; Robnett, Wertheimer, and Tenenbaum, 2018; Kelley, 2021).

To predict how women and men will be evaluated professionally and privately when they violate marital name norms (e.g., when *women keep* or *men change* their names), we draw on the framework of prescriptive gender stereotypes. According to this framework, women and men are 'prescribed' specific behaviours, characteristics, and roles and 'proscribed' others (Heilman, 2001, 2012; Prentice and Carranza, 2002). Prescriptive stereotypes refer to the widely shared norms and expectations deemed appropriate and 'normal' for individuals of a particular gender, and proscriptive stereotypes refer to expectations and norms about behaviours considered to be inappropriate. In this study, we examine how the public evaluates women and men when they break prescriptive stereotypes and engage in proscribed behaviours.

To test our pre-registered hypotheses on perceptions of women and men with gender-conventional and gender-unconventional marital name choices, we collected original survey experimental data on a national probability sample from Germany ( $N = 1,899$ ). In the survey experiment, we manipulated the marital name choice of a fictitious different-sex couple and asked respondents to rate each partner's commitment to their relationship and their job. Our analyses of these data showed that both men and women who keep their surnames upon marriage are viewed as less committed to their *relationships* than their name-changing counterparts. We also found that men who keep their names are viewed as more committed to their jobs than men who change their names. Yet, women who keep their names are not viewed as more

professionally committed than name-changing women. In fact, respondents viewed name-keeping women and name-changing men similarly in terms of work commitment. In summary, norm-breaking men are penalized at work but rewarded at home, whereas norm-breaking women are penalized at home but without a compensatory boost in perceived professional commitment.

Our study makes three primary contributions. First, in contrast to most existing work on marital name choice violations, which has been conducted in the United States (Etaugh *et al.*, 1999; Forbes *et al.*, 2002; Shafer, 2017; Robnett *et al.*, 2018; Kelley, 2023), our study was conducted in Germany—and hence a country with gender-egalitarian surname laws (Schwenzer, 1991; Meißner, 2020; German Missions in the United States, 2022). In most US states, name-changing is legally streamlined for women within marriage but much more difficult and expensive for men (Rosensaft, 2002; MacEacheron, 2016). This may limit the generalizability of US-based findings to countries with gender-neutral marital name choice laws. By studying the gendered effects of marital name choice in Germany, our study addresses this issue.

Second, most studies on marital name choice have been conducted with non-representative samples (Etaugh *et al.*, 1999; Forbes *et al.*, 2002; Robnett *et al.*, 2016, 2018; Wofford and Knotts, 2020; Kelley, 2023; Stefanova *et al.*, 2023), which limits the generalizability of their findings. In contrast, we collected data on a national probability sample and can therefore generalize our findings to the working-age population in Germany.

Third, we systematically examined the effects of marital name choice on women's and men's perceived commitments to both their romantic relationships and their jobs, which helped us to identify whether and how the impact of breaking gender norms varies by context. Women, for instance, are generally expected to be deferent and communal (Prentice and Carranza, 2002; Ridgeway, 2011), but these expectations are at odds with what is expected of employees who wish to advance in the workplace (Ridgeway, 2011). Likewise, men are expected to be agentic and individualistic (Scarborough *et al.*, 2019; Eagly *et al.*, 2020; Sullivan *et al.*, 2022)—characteristics that are appreciated in the context of paid work but not of the family. By examining how agentic, name-keeping women are perceived in the workplace and how communal, name-changing men are perceived in the family, our study provides important insights into the incentives to break with or adhere to gender norms.

## Literature review

In the following, we review the literature on gender differences in marital name choice behaviours in different-

sex relationships, considering women and men separately across the relationship and work contexts. We focus on different-sex couples, because studies have repeatedly shown that same-sex and queer couples are more likely to resist heteronormative practices, including the normalized practice that women change their names and men keep their names at marriage (Patterson and Farr, 2017; Dempsey and Lindsay, 2018; Underwood and Robnett, 2019; Lamont, 2020). Different-sex couples therefore remain the key context for examining the persistence—or ‘stickiness’—of traditional gender roles and expectations—including those of marital name choice conventions.

### Views of women

The existing literature on marital name choice has predominantly focused on women and examined the effects of marital name decisions on perceptions of women’s relationship commitment. In-depth interviews conducted in the United States and Europe revealed that people believe women should change their names to form a ‘family identity’ at marriage (Nugent, 2010; Hamilton *et al.*, 2011; Castrén, 2019; Duncan, Ellingsæter, and Carter, 2020; Lamont, 2020; Thwaites, 2020; Wutzler, 2020). US-based survey experiments have found that women who do not change their names are viewed as less committed, less loving, and less communal than women who change their names (Etaugh *et al.*, 1999; Robnett *et al.*, 2016; Kelley, 2023).

A few studies have investigated the effects of marital name choice on professional characteristics, but the results have been inconclusive. When asked about their choices, women state that they kept their names to maintain their professional identities (Johnson and Scheuble, 1995; Twenge, 1997; Laskowski, 2010) and to signal career commitment (Hoffnung, 2006). However, there may be a discrepancy between how society at large perceives name-keeping women and how they perceive themselves. A US-based survey experiment with undergraduate students found that name-keeping women were viewed as more agentic (Etaugh *et al.*, 1999). A more recent study on academics, however, found that name-keeping women were viewed as less competent and less committed to work than name-changing women (Stefanova *et al.*, 2023). Yet, another survey experiment on perceptions of political candidates found that US respondents did not view women’s electability or intelligence differently by marital name choices (Wofford and Knotts, 2020).

### Views of men

Few studies have explored the impact of men’s marital name choices on their perceived relationship commitment. Relying on a survey experiment conducted in

the United States, Kelley (2023) found that men in partnerships in which both partners kept their names were viewed as less committed than men in conventional partnerships (man keeps name and woman changes name). Yet, Kelley (2023) found that men who shared a hyphenated surname with their female partner were viewed as equally committed as men who kept their names. An earlier study that asked US college students to directly compare men with and without hyphenated surnames found that students perceived men with hyphenated names as more committed than men who kept their names (Forbes *et al.*, 2002). Hence, there is very little research on views of name-breaking men, and the findings from the extant research are mixed: In some studies, men are viewed as less committed to their relationships for breaking norms but in others, they are not.

Studies on the impact of marital name decisions on perceptions of men’s agentic traits have also yielded inconclusive results. One study found that men with hyphenated surnames were viewed as higher on instrumental traits (Forbes *et al.*, 2002), but another study found that perceptions of men’s power decreased when they merely married women who kept their surnames (Robnett *et al.*, 2018). Like the latter study, Kelley (2021) found that men whose wives kept their surnames experienced status losses.

### Relevance of research context

Previous studies on the perceptions of name-keeping versus name-changing on women’s and men’s professional and relationship commitment have been conducted in vastly different, highly specific contexts (and with small, non-probability samples and on slightly different outcomes). It is therefore not surprising that findings differed across studies.

The majority of survey experimental research on marital name choice decisions has been conducted in the United States (e.g., Etaugh *et al.*, 1999; Forbes *et al.*, 2002; Robnett *et al.*, 2018; Kelley, 2021, 2023), where legislation in most states imposes administrative and financial costs on men who seek to change their surnames at marriage and hence de facto promotes name-changing among women and name-keeping among men (Rosensaft, 2002; MacEacheron, 2016). By contrast, the few studies conducted in countries with gender-equal marital name legislation, e.g., Finland, Norway, and Germany, have primarily used qualitative approaches to examine how women and couples make marital name decisions (Castrén, 2019; Duncan *et al.*, 2020; Wutzler, 2020). Therefore, the findings from previous work do not generalize to countries with vastly different institutional regulations or the population in general.

## The German context

To address this gap, the current study turns to Germany as a research setting. Germany is characterized by greater gender equality in marital name choice policies than the United States, for instance (Rosensaft, 2002; Anthony, 2010; Kosur, 2015). Until the mid-1990s, either the woman or the man could change their name upon marriage; since then, both partners have been allowed to keep their names (Schwenzer, 1991; Meißner, 2020; German Missions in the United States, 2022).

Yet despite the gender-neutral legislation on name-changing or name-keeping at marriage in Germany and a recent modernization of gender role attitudes—Germany now ranks among the most progressive countries in Europe (Casella, Pampaka, and Williams, 2024; Lomazzi and Soboleva, 2024)—surname selection in Germany still follows traditional patterns. Only about 5 per cent of men in different-sex relationships in Germany change their names at marriage, while almost 75 per cent of women do (Gesellschaft für deutsche Sprache e.V., 2018). Hence, although Germany's marital name laws are more egalitarian than those in the United States, the marital name behaviours of different-sex couples are similar to the United States, where 87 per cent of women change their names at marriage (Shafer and Christensen, 2018).

Interestingly, marital name choices in Germany remain prominent over people's lifetimes. In some countries, marital name decisions may be less salient following marriage, but in Germany there are ample opportunities for violations of name change conventions to become salient long after marriage in both private and professional settings. Name changes and marital status, for instance, appear in official documents such as passports, identity cards, CVs, and grave-stones. Thus, there is the potential for marital name violations to have long-lasting impacts on how men and women are evaluated as romantic partners or employees. All of these features make Germany a particularly interesting case for examining how women and men are perceived by others when deciding whether to keep or change their family name upon marriage.

## Theoretical background

To generate hypotheses about the impact of marital name choices on women's and men's commitment to their relationships and jobs, we rely on the framework of prescriptive gender stereotypes (Heilman, 2001; Prentice and Carranza, 2002; Rudman *et al.*, 2012). This framework suggests that the public expects individuals to conform to specific norms and expectations based on their perceived gender (prescriptive stereotypes) and to avoid others (proscriptive stereotypes).

Specifically, women are expected to be communal, warm, and modest, whereas men are expected to be agentic, decisive, and independent (Heilman, 2001; Prentice and Carranza, 2002; Ridgeway, 2011). When individuals violate these expectations—either by failing to conform to prescriptive traits or by displaying proscriptive ones (e.g., when women are assertive or men are submissive)—they may face social penalties, such as negative evaluations in professional contexts (Benard and Correll, 2010; Moss-Racusin, Phelan, and Rudman, 2010; Fisk and Ridgeway, 2018).

Women's and men's marital name choices can signal that they adhere to prescribed gender stereotypes or that they deviate from proscribed characteristics. Based on interviews with Finnish couples, a study found that couples believed the '...marital name was entwined with the transition...to become a family...The name choice captured the gendered expectations that positioned women and men differently in relation to the agentic work required in the transition' (Castrén, 2019:253). Based on interviews with 105 US college-educated young adults, Lamont (2020) found that gendered courtship rituals that reinforce women's passivity and men's agency are a way of constructing commitment and love. Even couples that seek egalitarian relationships viewed women's surname changing as a gesture of commitment. Other qualitative research has found that respondents believe name-changing is a symbol of familial commitment, that name-keeping is an indicator self commitment, and that these commitments are incompatible for women (Nugent, 2010; Hamilton *et al.*, 2011).

## Gendered expectations in marital name choice

Women are hence expected to be communal, and name-changing is perceived to be a signal of that communality, whereas men are expected to be independent, and name-keeping is viewed as a signal of that independence. Therefore, women who keep their names may be perceived as agentic and assertive, and men who change their names may be viewed as modest and submissive. These marital name norm-breakers, then, violate proscriptive stereotypes and may be judged for doing so. According to Hollander (2018), negative evaluations of women and men who break norms are meant to reinforce gendered expectations. Generally, women and men who make unconventional choices (i.e., name-keeping women and name-changing men) are likely perceived more negatively than their counterparts.

## Variation in gender expectations across contexts

Yet, given that the norms and expectations for what is appropriate and desirable behaviour vary by gender and also across contexts, it is possible that people will

not always face negative judgement for breaking gender norms. Conceptually, it is therefore important to distinguish between general and context-specific norms and expectations to understand the extent to which gender deviance may affect perceptions of women and men (Ridgeway, 2011; Fisk and Ridgeway, 2018). Although women and men are expected to adhere to gender norms in both family and workplace settings, masculine qualities like agency are particularly valued in the workplace, while feminine qualities like selflessness are valued in the family. Therefore, the degree of judgment women and men encounter for breaking norms may vary across contexts. In particular, given that gender norms have been modernizing and many different-sex couples say they desire an egalitarian relationship (Gerson, 2009; Pedulla and Thébaud, 2015; Büning and Hipp, 2022), it is possible that negative judgments for breaking norms will be weaker in some contexts.

## Empirical predictions

Our first set of predictions relates to perceptions of women and men who break both gender norms and context-specific norms. Here, we expect that women with unconventional marital name choice will be perceived more negatively in the family context and men with unconventional marital name choice will be perceived more negatively in the work context. Specifically, because women are expected to be deferent and deference is particularly valued for women in family contexts (Risman, 1998; England, 2010; Ridgeway, 2011), Hypothesis 1 suggests that *women who keep their names will be viewed as less committed to their relationships than women who change their names (i.e., less perceived relationship commitment for women with unconventional than conventional surname choices)*. Because men are expected to be agentic and agency is valued in the workplace (Fisk and Ridgeway, 2018), Hypothesis 2 posits that *men who change their names will be viewed as less committed to their jobs than men who keep their names (i.e., less perceived work commitment for men with unconventional than conventional choices)*.

Our second set of predictions is about perceptions of women and men who violate general gender role expectations but follow context-specific norms. In other words, how are agentic, name-keeping women—i.e., women with ‘unconventional marital name choices’—perceived in the workplace and how are communal, name-changing, and thus ‘unconventional’ men perceived in the family? Is it possible that gender stereotypes are more flexible for women in professional contexts and men in family contexts? When contextual norms contradict prescribed gender norms, violations

might be tolerated and even viewed positively as there may be ‘domains of societal leeway’ as Prentice and Carranza argue (2002: 280). Specifically, because agency is valued in the workplace, Hypothesis 3 posits that *name-keeping women will be viewed as more committed to their jobs than name-changing women (i.e., greater perceived work commitment for women with unconventional surname choices compared to women with conventional surname choices)*. Likewise, because communality and commitment are valued in relationships and men’s involvement in family life has increasingly become socially accepted (e.g., as research on fathers’ parental leave taking has repeatedly shown, Hipp 2025; Petts *et al.*, 2024; 2022), it is likely that men will benefit from unconventional name choice behaviours in the relationship context (*i.e., greater perceived relationship commitment for men with unconventional than conventional surname choices*).

Our last prediction is about perceptions of men in relationships in which both partners keep their names. As it is unclear whether people will perceive those men as adhering to gender norms (because they keep their surnames upon marriage) or as violating gender norms (because their wife keeps her surname), we have less clear expectations for men in those couples. On the one hand, men in marriages where both partners keep their names may be viewed as unconventional for marrying (and tolerating or even supporting) a name-keeping woman. On the other hand, people typically report a preference for couples who share a ‘family name’ (Nugent, 2010; Hamilton *et al.*, 2011; Castrén, 2019). Therefore, men in couples in which both partners keep their names could either be viewed as more committed to their relationships than men who share a name with their partner or they may be viewed as less committed. These considerations led us to pre-register the following, alternative predictions: Hypothesis 5a suggests that *men in couples where both partners keep their names will be perceived as more committed to their relationships than men whose wives change their names*; Hypothesis 5b states that *men in couples where both partners keep their own names will be perceived as less committed to their relationships than men whose wives change their names*.

## Data and methods

### Experimental design

To test our hypotheses, we used a between-subjects experimental design in which respondents were randomly assigned to read one vignette that described a different-sex couple.<sup>1</sup> All the couples were in their early 30s and had shared an apartment for 3 years. The couples wanted to have children and were planning to get

married soon. To signal each partner's gender, we selected common female and male first names in Germany in 1990, when people in their early 30s would have been born (*Gesellschaft für deutsche Sprache e.V.*, 2023).

We randomly varied the couples' intended marital name choices and education levels. Regarding marital name choice, there were three possible choices: (i) the female partner planned to change her name to the male partner's name, (ii) the male partner planned to change his name to the female partner's name, and (iii) both partners planned to keep their names and not share a name. Regarding education, we varied whether the two partners had a (i) tertiary or (ii) vocational education. Assessing how marital name choice violations are perceived by others across education levels is important for obtaining generalizable and unbiased estimates. Women in high-status, professional jobs—where name changes can be particularly detrimental (e.g., academia, the creative arts, or journalism)—are not only more likely to keep their surname upon marriage (*Rosar, 2023*), but people also tend to be more understanding if they keep their names when getting married (*Scheuble and Johnson, 1993; Hamilton et al., 2011*). Couples with a tertiary education were described as having met in college. Couples with a vocational education were described as having met in vocational training, which is the common career path for non-college graduates in Germany.

After having read the vignette, respondents were asked how committed they thought the woman and the man were to their job and their relationship. Answer options ranged from 1 (not committed at all) to 7 (very committed). On average, perceived relationship commitment was rated slightly higher (mean of 6.11 and s.d. of 1.10 for female targets and mean of 6.17 and s.d. of 1.05 for male targets) than perceived professional commitment (mean of 5.22 and s.d. of 1.22 for female targets and mean of 5.39 and s.d. of 1.20 for male targets). A translated vignette with each variation of the manipulated dimensions is shown in [Figure 1](#).

To avoid potential ordering effects, we randomized several features of the instrument: the order in which the female and male partners' names appeared in the vignette and question text, whether the woman or man had the surname 'Koch' or 'Fischer', and whether respondents were asked about relationship or job commitment first.

### Data and sample

Our experiment was implemented in a survey on work values and attitudes in Germany in early 2023. Potential respondents were incentivized with a €10 post-hoc payment for study participation, and

informed consent was obtained from all participants. Using a national probability sampling scheme, 6,000 respondents, aged 23–65 years, were invited via email to participate in the online study. Out of the total 4,211 study participants, a total of 2,008 were presented with our survey experiment. All research was performed in accordance with ethical guidelines and data protection requirements. Following our pre-registered analysis plan ([https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=4YC\\_LJ8](https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=4YC_LJ8)), we excluded 104 of the 2,008 respondents who failed the manipulation check<sup>2</sup> and 5 respondents who had missing information on variables included in the analysis. This led to a final analytic sample of 1,899 respondents. [Supplementary Table A1](#) provides an overview of the demographic characteristics of the initial and analytic samples.

### Analytic strategy

Following our pre-registration protocol, we used multi-variable OLS regression to examine how perceptions of women and men vary when they violate stereotypical marital name choice conventions. We stratified regression models by the gender of the target. As our tests of OLS assumptions revealed that error terms were not homoscedastic across all models, we estimated all models with robust standard errors. In the results section, we display the predicted values of each outcome by target gender and marital name choice and show the full regression outputs only in the [Appendix \(Supplementary Tables A2 and A3\)](#).

In the analyses, we included all manipulated vignette dimensions as well as the following respondent-level characteristics: gender (woman, man, and non-binary), relationship status (married or in a civil partnerships vs. other), children under 18 in the household (children vs. no children), age groups by decade (20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, and 60s), region of upbringing (East Germany, West Germany, outside Germany), education (tertiary vs. non-tertiary degree), respondents' subjective assessment of their financial situation (comfortable, getting by, and hard or very hard to get by), and current employment status (working vs. non-working). We also included three design-level indicators as covariates: whether the woman's or man's first name was listed first in the vignette, which surname was used first in the vignette, and whether the respondents were asked questions about relationship or job commitment first.

### Results

[Figure 2](#) displays perceived relationship commitment by couples' marital name choices and hence tests Hypothesis 1 and 4. As predicted, respondents viewed both women and men who kept their names as less committed to their relationships than women and men who

**[Lisa Koch and Philipp Fischer/Philipp Fischer and Lisa Koch]**, both in their early 30s, met during **[college/vocational school]**. They both work full-time and have been sharing an apartment for three years. They want to have children together and will marry soon. **[Lisa will take her future husband's surname, so she will be called Lisa Fischer in the future./Philipp will take his future wife's surname, so he will be called Philipp Koch in the future./Lisa and Philipp will both keep their surnames after the wedding, so Lisa will continue to be called Lisa Koch and Philipp will continue to be called Philipp Fischer.]**

How committed do you think **[Lisa Koch/Philipp Fischer]** is to **[his/her]** **[work/relationship]**?

**Figure 1** Translated vignette text and questions with bolded manipulated dimensions

changed their names. This means that norm-breaking had a negative impact on women in the family context: Respondents perceived name-keeping women as less committed to their relationships than name-changing women ( $-0.38$  when both partners kept their names and  $-0.22$  when the woman kept her name and the man changed his name; both  $P < 0.001$ ). However, norm-breaking had a positive impact on men in the family context: Respondents perceived name-changing men as more committed to their relationships than name-keeping men who were in relationships with name-changing women ( $+0.17$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ).

But, what about name-keeping men who married name-keeping women? We had competing predictions regarding the impact of being in a couple in which both partners keep their names on men's relationship commitment (Hypothesis 5a and 5b). **Figure 2** shows that respondents perceived these men as less committed to their relationships than name-keeping men in couples in which the female partner changed her name ( $-0.25$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). This shows that men may be perceived as violating norms through their association with women who break marital name norms.

In summary, we find that women are granted less flexibility in their marital name choices in the family context than men. Specifically, women in couples with unconventional surname choices are viewed as less committed to their relationships than both conventional women and men in the unconventional couple type, in which both partners keep their names. However, men in unconventional couples, in which men change their names, are viewed as more committed than conventional men.

Next, we turn to the results on perceived work commitment by couples' marital name choices. **Figure 3** displays predicted values of women's and men's perceived work commitment by the couples' marital name choices. As predicted in Hypothesis 2, men who broke marital name norms were viewed more negatively in the work context. Respondents perceived name-changing men as less committed to their jobs than

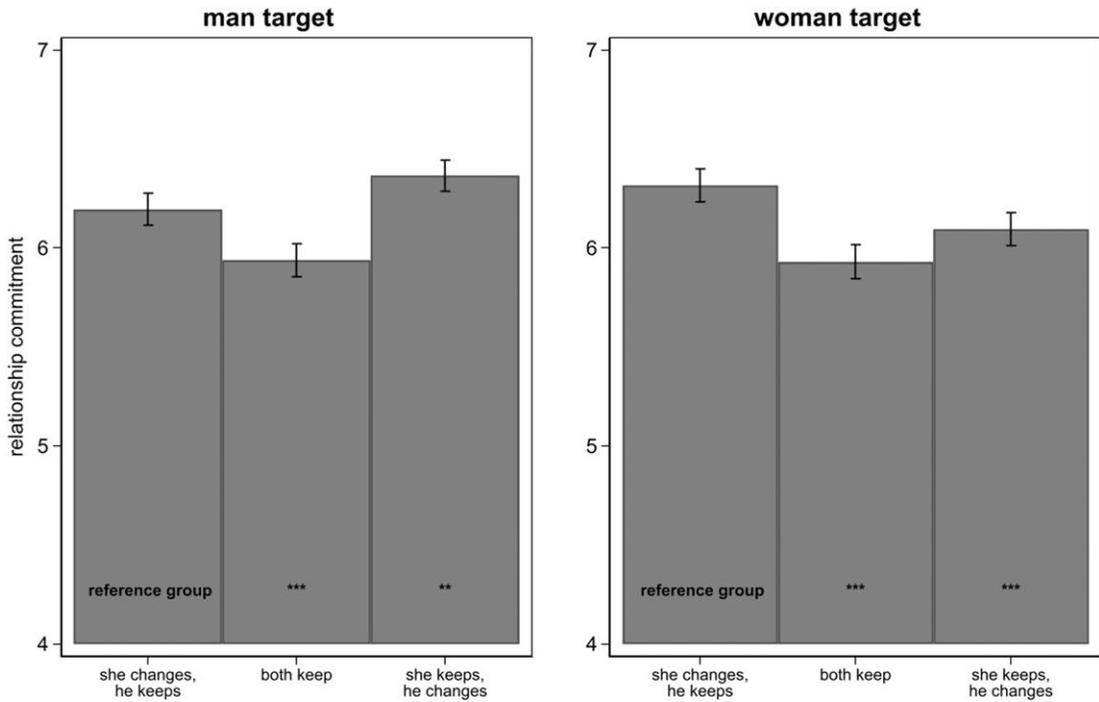
name-keeping men in relationships with name-changing women ( $-0.36$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). Men's perceived professional commitment was also contingent on their partner's marital name choice. Respondents perceived that men's professional commitment was lower when both partners kept their names compared to when the man kept his name and the woman changed her name ( $-0.16$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ).

Contrary to our expectation (Hypothesis 3), norm-breaking women were not perceived as more committed to their jobs than name-keeping women. Regardless of whether women were with men who changed or kept their names, respondents did not see a difference in professional commitment between name-keeping and name-changing women. Interestingly, respondents perceived women's professional commitment similar to that of name-changing men, illustrating that targets' gender, rather than marital name choice alone shapes perceptions of work commitment.

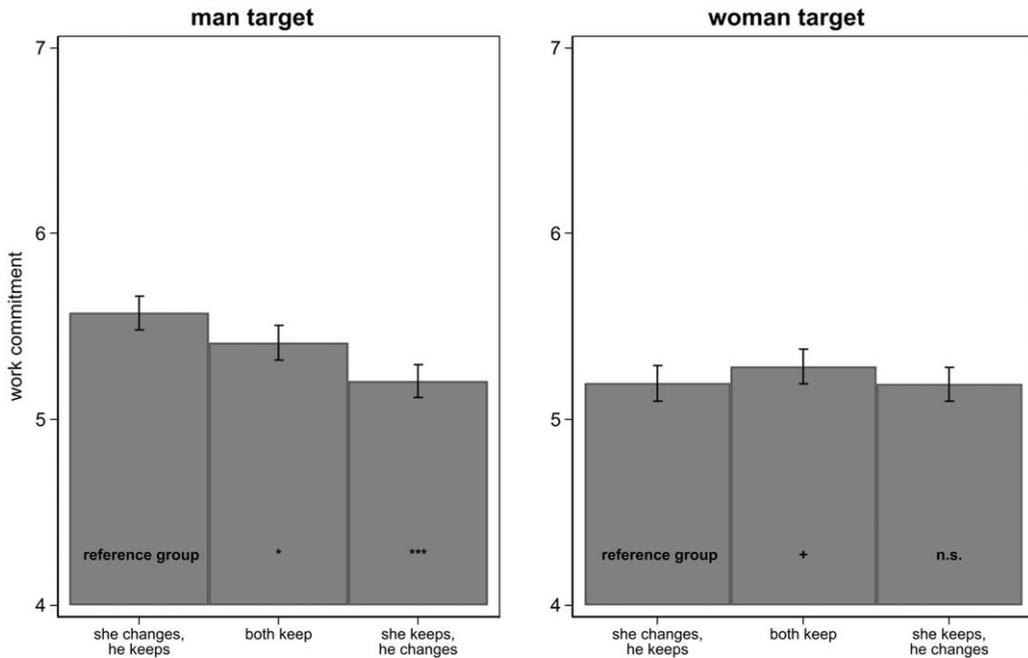
These results show that women are judged negatively but men positively for unconventional marital name choices in the family context. Men in relationships where both partners keep their surnames are viewed more negatively than men in relationships with conventional marital name choices. However, men are judged more negatively than women for unconventional marital name choices in the work context. While name-changing men are viewed as less committed to their jobs than name-keeping men, women's perceived work commitment does not vary by their surname choice. Hence, men are granted less flexibility in the workplace context than women—or, put differently, women's perceived work commitment is not boosted by adhering to the context-specific norms at work. From this, we conclude that the interactional implications of breaking gender norms are complex and depend on both gender and context.

### Supplementary analyses

To assess the robustness of our findings and explore potential subgroup variation in the observed effects—



**Figure 2** Perceived relationship commitment by targets' marital name choice and gender. The figure displays the linear predictions estimated following OLS regression models that were stratified by target gender; data were collected on a 7-point scale; full regression results are shown in the [Supplementary Table A2](#).  $N = 1,899$



**Figure 3** Perceived work commitment by targets' marital name choice and gender. The figure displays the linear predictions estimated following OLS regression models that were stratified by target gender; data were collected on a 7-point scale; full regression results are shown in the [Supplementary Table A3](#).  $N = 1,899$

made possible by the size and probabilistic nature of our sample—we estimated some additional models. First, we reassessed our research questions with ordered logit regressions. Ordered logit regression models produced the same results as the linear regression models presented in the main results section (see [Supplementary Table A4](#)). The direction of the marital name coefficients and the significance levels did not change.

Second, we examined whether the effect of targets' marital name choice varied by whether targets had a tertiary or vocational education, which we manipulated in the experiment (see [Supplementary Tables A5–A8](#), Model 1). The inter-action term for targets' marital name choice and targets' education level was insignificant in all models, suggesting that marital name choice affects women's and men's perceived relationship and work commitment similarly, regardless of the targets' education level.<sup>3</sup>

Third, we also explored variation in the effects of marital name choices by respondents' education, marital status, and region of upbringing (see [Supplementary Tables A5–A8](#), Models 2–4). These analyses showed that the effects of marital name choice on women's and men's perceived relationship and work commitment did not vary by respondent-level characteristics. The results thus suggest that there is some degree of cultural consensus in attitudes about marital name choice in Germany.

## Conclusion

This study examined the effects of marital name choice on women's and men's perceived work and relationship commitment. Specifically, we asked: Are women and men perceived differently across contexts when they break marital name norms? To address this question, we drew on the literature on prescriptive and proscriptive stereotypes ([Heilman, 2001, 2012](#); [Prentice and Carranza, 2002](#)) to theorize differential effects of norm-breaking by gender and context. In particular, we theorized that norm-breaking women would face negative judgement in the family context but positive judgment in the work context, while norm-breaking men would encounter negative judgments in the work context but positive judgement in the family context. To empirically test our pre-registered hypotheses, we implemented an original survey experiment in a national probability sample in Germany, in which we manipulated individuals' marital name choices and gender. After reading a short description of a couple in which either one partner changed their name or both partners kept their names, respondents were asked to rate a woman's and man's work and relationship commitment.

Our findings reveal that the general population in Germany holds women and men to different standards. While norm-violating (i.e., name-changing) men were viewed to be less committed to their jobs but more committed to their relationships, norm-violating (i.e., name-keeping) women were viewed as less committed to their relationships than name-changing women but not viewed as more committed to their jobs. Hence, while men have at least one incentive to change their names—people view them as more committed to their relationships—women do not get a boost in perceived professional commitment if they keep their names. Women who violate marital name norms do not benefit in how others see them professionally and they are considered to be worse romantic partners.

With these findings, our study extends the literature on marital name choice in particular and the literature on non-conforming gender behaviours more generally in several ways. First, most of the existing research on marital name choice behaviours has been conducted in the United States, where men face a more costly and time-consuming process than women to change their names. It is therefore not surprising that in the US context, women face strong expectations of changing their names and are judged negatively when they break marital name norms ([Hamilton et al., 2011](#); [Kelley, 2023](#)). However, a growing body of evidence suggests that sanctions for women who break marital name norms also prevail in other countries ([Castrén, 2019](#); [Duncan et al., 2020](#); [Thwaites, 2020](#)). By studying how women's and men's marital name choice behaviours are viewed in a gender-neutral or gender-egalitarian policy context, as is the case in Germany ([Schwenzer, 1991](#); [Meißner, 2020](#); [German Missions in the United States, 2022](#)), this study adds another data point and suggests that, even in these contexts, individuals face gender-specific trade-offs when considering non-conventional surname choices. However, to truly assess whether perceptions of women and men who violate marital name choice conventions vary across settings and policy contexts, simultaneous experiments in Germany, the United States, and other countries with similar designs and on comparable populations are needed.

Moreover, our finding that women are granted less flexibility in non-conforming gender behaviour also adds to the literature on the unequal standards and double binds women encounter in today's societies (e.g., [Phelan and Rudman, 2010](#); [Rudman et al., 2012](#); [Hipp, 2025](#)). Our study illustrates once more that norms about masculinity and femininity remain particularly rigid for women in the family context and men in the work context. At the same time, given that name-changing men were viewed as more committed to their relationships than conventional men, our findings suggest that there are some specific contexts in

which gender role judgments are more lenient for men than they are for women. It is hence possible that the general public in Germany has embraced more flexible gendered expectations of men in the family context and that that leniency extends to other family domains. Future research should explore this issue.

In conclusion, the findings of our study illustrate the stickiness of established gender conventions and the difficulties of changing them. Even in a gender-neutral or gender-egalitarian policy context, as is the case in Germany (Schwenzer, 1991; Meißner, 2020; German Missions in the United States, 2022), negative evaluations of norm-breaking behaviours persist and may operate as informal obstacles to societal change. Third-party evaluations serve as normative mechanisms that can stabilize prevailing gender role expectations and stereotypes (Ridgeway, 2011). What others think and what they explicitly or implicitly communicate matters for individuals' behaviours and ultimately promotes or hinders societal change. For women, the fear of being seen as less relationship or family oriented may discourage name-keeping, even among those who value continuity in their personal or professional identity. For men, the fear of being seen as less agentic or committed to their careers may deter them from engaging in egalitarian naming practices, thereby reinforcing traditional gender roles. Workplace leaders, HR professionals, and policymakers should be mindful of how implicit biases based on naming choices may subtly affect perceptions of employee commitment and professionalism. Awareness of these biases—in particular in a country like Germany, where CVs and job application materials also contain detailed private information—could inform diversity and inclusion initiatives, as well as guidelines for minimizing gendered stereotyping in hiring and evaluation processes.

## Notes

1. If we had added sexual orientation as a manipulated dimension to our experiment, we would have had more conditions and fewer respondents per condition, which would have weakened our statistical power to detect statistically significant effects.
2. Respondents were asked whether they could 'remember which of the following statements is correct?' and were then given the following three answer options: '(a) Lisa and Philipp will both keep their last names after marriage; (b) Lisa will take the last name of her future husband after marriage; (c) Philipp will take the last name of his future wife after marriage.'
3. In these models, the main effects of marital name choice lose statistical significance—likely due to small cell sizes—for women's perceived relationship commitment if a man changes his name, and for men's perceived work

commitment when both partners keep their names. The direction of the coefficients does not change.

## Author contributions

Kristin Kelley (Conceptualization [lead], Data curation [equal], Formal analysis [equal], Investigation [equal], Methodology [equal], Software [equal], Validation [equal], Visualization [equal], Writing—original draft [equal], Writing—review & editing [equal]), and Lena Hipp (Conceptualization [equal], Data curation [equal], Formal analysis [equal], Funding acquisition [lead], Investigation [equal], Methodology [equal], Project administration [lead], Resources [lead], Software [equal], Validation [equal], Visualization [equal], Writing—original draft [equal], Writing—review & editing [equal]).

## Supplementary data

Supplementary data are available at [ESR](#) online.

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## Data availability

The derived data and analysis syntax supporting this article are accessible at <https://osf.io/3he29>.

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