

# Name changing and gender: an analysis of name changes made in the United Kingdom via enrolled deed polls, 1998–2019

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**Abstract:** Name changing is an under-researched topic in socio-onomastics. In this article, we extend knowledge of and understanding about gender and name changing by analysing ‘enrolled deed polls’, which people in the United Kingdom can use to change any part or all parts of their names. We examine which names are changed in relation to gender, including those we linked to transitions in gender identity. Our quantitative analyses of 10 665 enrolled deed polls for the period 1998–2019 shows that, over time, women have replaced men as the majority of applicants for name change and that, compared to men, women are more likely to make ‘surname only’ changes

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to their name. Among men applicants, there was an increase over time in changes made to first and middle names (a doubled figure in 2019 compared to 1998). Although case numbers are small, of the name changes we attributed to gender transition, the majority were changes made to the applicant's first name and/or middle name. Our article concludes by reflecting on what our analysis of otherwise unexamined records of enrolled deed polls reveals about the (re)doing of gender identities through name changing in contemporary societies.

**Keywords:** name change, gender, United Kingdom, enrolled deed polls, name change trends

## 1. Introduction

The names of a person are closely linked to their familial, civil-legal and socio-cultural identities (e.g. Finch 2008; Aldrin 2011; Pilcher 2016) and, relatedly, to their self-identity (e.g. Emmelhainz 2012; Watzlawik 2012). Given that names are a key part of who someone 'is', a change of a person's name may signal a change in one or more of their identities. The study of name changing remains an under-researched area of socio-onomastics (Aldrin 2016; Scherr 1986), despite the potential it has for developing insight into the complexities of contemporary identities within socially and culturally diverse societies. In this article, we extend knowledge of and understanding about the gender identities-related significance of name changing behaviour by analysing 'enrolled deed polls'. These are a formal procedure through which people in the United Kingdom can achieve a change of any or all of their official names.

Our article begins with an overview of research literature relating to name changing, identities and gender, along with a description of the legal context of, and several routes to, officially changing a person's name in the United Kingdom. We then outline the methods and data of the wider study of enrolled deed polls that we draw on here. We present findings from our quantitative analyses of cases of enrolled deed polls where people change their own name and show

that name changing and gender are associated in different ways. We examine which parts of people's names are changed in relation to gender, including those linked to transitions in gender identity. Our article concludes by reflecting on what our analysis of otherwise unexamined records of enrolled deed polls reveals about the (re)doing of gender identities through name changing in contemporary societies, including in the longer term.

## 1.1 Name changing and identities

There are several different types of name change, and each is likely to have multifarious implications for the identity-related causes, and consequences, of a person's change of name. For Strauss (1959:18), 'The changing of names marks a rite of passage. It means such things as that the person wants to have the kind of name he [sic] thinks represents him [sic] as a person, does not want any longer to be the kind of person that his [sic] previous name signified' (see also Alford 1988). Here, Strauss is describing identity motivations that precede a name change made voluntarily by an individual, and to their own name. A person's name can also be changed without consent, by someone else. For example, the name of an enslaved individual may have been changed by their 'owner' (Benson 2006) or a child's names changed by their adoptive parents (Hagström 2017; Pilcher, Hooley & Coffey 2020). It is also important to recognize that a person's name may be changed through a formal, legally recognized procedure, as well as unofficially through situational variation in everyday encounters (nicknames are one example). Law and procedures regulating official name change are shown to vary cross-nationally (Walkowiak 2016; e.g. Coulmont 2014 details the process in France, Leibring 2017 describes the Swedish context and Wentling 2020, the United States). Our focus in this article is on gendered patterns in official name changes made by people in the United Kingdom in relation to their own name (we refer to these people as 'applicants' in our analysis). We include changes in several kinds of names (first names, middle names and surnames).

While early research on name changes (primarily in relation to heterosexual women's marital surnames) found identity change to be an inevitable cause and/or consequence of a changed name (see Stafford & Kline 1996, and references), later evidence in the field points to a much more complex process. For example, Emmelheinz (2012) described name change as a manifestation of identity elasticity, enabling people to maintain a sense of self while adding or re-negotiating certain elements of meaning attached to it. This perspective is in line with social constructivist theory recognizing that names can be seen as resources that people may use in varying ways: to create, confirm, project, or re-create various identities (Goffman 1968), including in relation to gender (Aldrin 2015; Pilcher 2017). In line with this approach, it is argued that name changes, like other kinds of meaning making, must be recognized as deeply situated in a specific context or community of practice (McConnell-Ginnet 2008), and as motivated by specific social, cultural and communicative goals.

To date, the two main topics in the empirical study of people's official name changes are name changes by or for individuals whose ethnicities are minoritized in contexts of migration and/or racial discrimination (e.g. Bursell 2012; Fermaglich 2018; Koshravi 2012; see also Coulmont 2014 and references), and heterosexual women's marital surname changes (e.g. Bechsgaard, in this issue; Castrén 2018; Duncan, Ellingsæter & Carter 2020; Gooding & Kreider 2009; Seheuble, Klingemann & Johnson 2000). There are also a few studies examining the incidence of and motivations for marital surname change by couples who are gay (e.g. Patterson & Farr 2016; Suter & Oswald 2003) and, more recently, first name changing linked to gender identity transitions (e.g. Anzani et al. 2023; Lind 2023; Obasi et al. 2019; Sinclair-Palm, in this issue; Wentling 2020). Hence, as Mills (2003) emphasized, name change implies a complex negotiation of identities, and pressures from social values, norms and traditions. Name change has been argued to be a way to leave an unwanted or stigmatized identity behind (Koshravi 2012; Strauss 1959) or to avoid practical issues with spelling and pronunciation (Frändén 2010). Relevant to our topic of gender identities, official name change is also argued to

be a way to establish a new identity as a couple (e.g. Kerns 2011), as a 'proper family' when living in a complex arrangement (e.g. Duncan, Ellingsæter & Carter 2018) or as a person who is transgender or gender non-binary (e.g. Anzani et al. 2023; Sinclair-Palm, in this issue). In addition, as Frändén (2010) points out, the identity work performed through a change of name can point in several directions: simultaneously both inwards (creating a sense of 'self' or 'us') and outwards (creating an image or expectations among others).

People's names can comprise first name, middle name and surname (although not all naming cultures follow this convention). An official name change can therefore involve amendments to one, or more, or all, parts of an individual's 'name' and in a variety of combinations. Voluntary changes of first names are argued to be rarely practiced in most cultures of the world (Alford 1988), a rarity reflected in the paucity of empirical studies examining change of first names (although, see Coulmont 2014). The low incidence of first name changing indicates that first names are so closely linked to personal identity that voluntarily changing them risks identity loss and would require very specific reasons, such as communicating a new gender identity to oneself and to others (e.g. Sinclair-Palm, in this issue; Wentling 2020). Indeed, we argue that the most substantive grouping of empirical research examining the phenomenon of first name changing are studies of first names in relation to gender identity transition.

Official changes of surnames (family names or last names) occur in many cultures and are argued to be connected to changes in civil or social status (e.g. linked to marriage or civil partnership – see, for example, Bechsgaard, in this issue; Grønstad, in this issue; Duncan, Ellingsæter & Carter 2018), or to the adoption of children (Pilcher, Hooley & Coffey 2020) or as a strategy to avoid racism (e.g. Fermaglich 2018; Khosravi 2012). The higher incidence of surname changing compared to first name changing is reflected in the larger number of empirical studies examining this practice. These include some longitudinal studies (e.g. Fermaglich 2018; Scherr 1986) and/or studies using sizable datasets (e.g. Broom, Beem & Harris 1955; Khosravi 2012). Surnames are often seen as primarily linked to col-

lective identity (Hanks & Parkin 2016), expressing the individual as part of a specific group, especially as a couple or in terms of family lineage but also in terms of a language community or a nation, for example (Finch 2008). These are group affiliations which can be changed or re-negotiated throughout life and can be marked through surname change. Surnames can also be linked to the construction of personal identity and the choice to keep or change one's surname, as well as the choice of one surname over another, can contribute to a sense of uniqueness, independence and the establishment or maintenance of a professional identity, especially for women (Laskowski 2010). In some cultures, including in the United Kingdom, surname changing is strongly gendered, a reflection of power relations in patriarchal, gender binary and heteronormative societies (see Pilcher 2017). In such cultures, empirical evidence on marital surname change suggests that, in heterosexual couples, it is the woman partner who is often expected to change her surname, and if she does so, common rationales relate to family connectedness (to show marital union and commitment, family solidarity, to signify the beginning of a new stage of life) or pragmatism, as a means of avoiding disparity of surnames within a family unit (e.g. Boxer & Gritsenko, 2005; see also Thwaites, 2016; Wilson, 2009). In relation to surname change, it is women's experiences that have been the focus of enquiry and men's experiences are neglected (Aldrin 2016:390; although see Grønstad, this issue). Studies of the surnaming practices of gay men couples suggest that surname changing is not practiced (Clarke et al. 2008; Patterson & Farr 2016), whereas studies of gay women couples reveal more variance in surnaming practices (Dempsey & Lindsay 2017; Suter & Oswald 2003).

Our review of the research literature on name changing and gender shows that marital surname changing by women in heterosexual relationships forms the most substantive topic area. In this article, in addition to extending understandings of women's surname change, we significantly advance knowledge about other aspects of name changing and gender that are currently under-researched. These include men's name changing practices, gendered patterns of changes made to first

names and to middle names, and name changing by people who are transgender. By analysing records of enrolled deed polls in the United Kingdom 1998–2019, we also break new ground in documenting what long-term trends are in name changing and the (re)construction of gender identities in contemporary societies.

## 1.2 Official name changing in the United Kingdom: contexts and procedures

As we noted earlier, law and procedures regulating official name change vary cross-nationally. Under English common law, an adult in the United Kingdom may change any part or all of their name an unlimited number of times and for any reason, and without using any particular legal procedure, provided that such action is not undertaken for deceptive or fraudulent purposes (UK Government 2024). Probably the most common and routine means of evidencing name change is via certificates of marriage, used by women who change their surname when marrying a man (a name changing practice that is the norm in the United Kingdom). Certificates of civil partnerships could similarly be used as evidence of surname change, and presumably also certificates of divorce or dissolution of civil partnerships. A further means of officially-evidenced name changing are adoption certificates, which record names by which a child is to be known after their legal adoption is completed. Outside these scenarios, adult individuals wishing to evidence change of their own name(s) can do so simply by completing a ‘deed of change of name’ (we term this an ‘ordinary’ deed poll). This is a simple do-it-yourself but effectual form of contract in English law, concerning one person and signed by that person in the presence of a witness (who does not have to be legally qualified). Alternatively, individuals may choose to pay a fee to a commercial service provider (e.g. deedpolloffice.com) to undertake the process of obtaining an ordinary deed poll on their behalf, and which may also include verification by a qualified legal professional. Perhaps because using a commercial service provider makes the process *appear* to be more ‘official’ and ‘legal’ than the

‘do-it-yourself-with-a-friend’ method, it seems to have become an increasingly popular route to name changing in the United Kingdom. In 2011 it was reported that 58 000 people had used one company’s service to change a name, an increase of 4 000 on the previous year and compared to only 5 000 people a year who did so in the previous decade (McClatchey 2011). Likewise, it was reported that a record 85 000 people had used one company’s commercial deed poll service to change a name in 2015 (Johnston 2016). However, there are no centrally held or publicly available records in the United Kingdom relating to ordinary deed polls, or to any of the above-described procedures by which an official change of name can be achieved and/or evidenced. This makes it impossible to find out the total number of people using these procedures, what their socio-cultural characteristics are, and which names are changed.

### 1.3 Enrolled deed polls

‘Enrolled’ deed polls are a further route to name changing available to individuals in the United Kingdom, and one for which there are centrally held and publicly available records. Compared to an ‘ordinary’ deed poll, an enrolled deed poll is a legal procedure by which an individual publicly declares a change of name through application to the Royal Courts of Justice. Enrolled deed polls enable resident British or British Commonwealth citizens to change their own name(s) officially and to have their name change published as a matter of public record. Applications for an enrolled deed poll can also be made on behalf of another person (e.g. parents, guardians or local authorities seeking to change the name of a child in their care).

Records of enrolled deed polls for England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have been openly published in *The Gazette* (the official journal of statutory notices) since 1914. Enrolled deed polls are not among the most commonly used procedures to formally enact and/or evidence name change in the United Kingdom. Compared to ordinary deed polls (whether the do-it-yourself version – which is cost-free – or through a commercial service provider, where fees vary



but currently average approximately GBP 21), enrolled deed polls are more complex, take longer to achieve, and are more costly (currently approximately GBP 42). Moreover, because they result in a public declaration of name change, enrolled deed polls are unlikely to be used by people whose name change is motivated by safeguarding reasons. Nonetheless, as with ordinary deed polls, increasing numbers of people have used enrolled deed polls. There were 205 published records of enrolled deed polls in *The Gazette* in 1998, a figure that remained steady up until 2014 (235 published records). However, in 2015 there were 1 236 published records, a significant – and unexplained – sudden increase. For 2019, the end date for our analysis, 2 552 records of enrolled deed polls were published. The figure for 2022 (at the time of writing, the latest full year for which published records of enrolled deed polls were available), showed a further increase to 3 233.

The precise wording of enrolled deed polls varies, including over time, but all contain key details that enable analysis of name changing behaviour. As shown in the following example, records of enrolled deed polls specify the applicant's 'old' and 'new' name(s):

Notice is hereby given that by a Deed Poll dated [day/month/year] and enrolled in the Supreme Court of England and Wales on [day/month/year], I, [applicant's new full name], of [applicant's postal address], [applicant's marital status and citizenship], by virtue of section 11(1) of the British Nationality Act 1981, abandoned the name of [old names] and assumed in lieu thereof the name of [new names].

Records of enrolled deed polls are an atypical route to official name changing, as we note above. Despite this, and their previous neglect by onomastic scholars, we argue that records of enrolled deed polls are richly deserving of analysis. The growth in numbers of people using enrolled deed polls mirrors reported growth in numbers of people using ordinary deed polls (Johnston 2016; McClatchey 2011). They are the only official and openly available source of evidence in the United Kingdom about long-term trends in, and contemporary patterns of, the incidence of name changing, types of name change

and of the characteristics of people who change their names – including in relation to gender identities. In this article, we use this valuable source of evidence about name changing to explore two key research questions about name change in the United Kingdom for the period 1998–2019. Among people changing their own names (‘applicants’)

- (1) Is there an association between name changing and gender?
- (2) Are there any gendered patterns in the types of names being changed?

## 2. Data and methods

### 2.1 Data collection

This article and its focus on gender and name changing draws on a wider descriptive and analytical research project on name changing conducted through an examination of records of enrolled deed polls, published in *The Gazette* between 1998 and 2019. The rationale for this timeframe is that: (i) digital records of enrolled deed polls are searchable only from 1998 onwards; (ii) key acts potentially impacting gendered name changing behaviour passed into law during this period, including The Civil Partnership Act 2004, The Gender Recognition Act 2004, and the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013. Ethical review of the wider study of name changing via enrolled deed polls was undertaken by the chair of the relevant research ethics committee at Nottingham Trent University, who decided that, due to the project’s use of secondary data from published sources, a full ethics review was not required. Subsequently, the principal investigator of the wider study (Pilcher) used *The Gazette’s* data service to purchase a dataset of all 15 976 records of enrolled deed polls from 1998 to 2019. These records were found by using the code 2 901 (‘Change of Name’) to search within the digitized version of all three editions (London, Edinburgh and Belfast) of *The Gazette*. The dataset was delivered in a comma-separated values (CSV) file format compatible with Microsoft Excel and customized to exclude people’s postal addresses.

## 2.2 Data analysis

Initial analyses of the customized dataset of records of enrolled deed polls within a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet involved researchers reading each record of an enrolled deed poll and transforming data each record contained about name change into new categorial or nominal variables. For ethical reasons, and to comply with the Open Government Licence V3.0 regulating use of data, and to prepare data for statistical analysis, all names contained within the customized dataset were removed by coding names of applicants and/or subjects of the name change into relevant categorial variables.

Researchers removed first names and middle names from the full dataset by assigning a gender to them and coding as the variables 'woman/girl', 'man/boy' or 'gender neutral'. First names and/or middle names were therefore used as a proxy for the gender of the applicant and/or subject of an enrolled deed poll. It is a very strong cultural norm in the United Kingdom (and elsewhere) to give a new-born baby a sex-specific first name (Alford 1988), according to the initial sex categorization of its body as female or male. Further, in the United States at least, almost all (97 per cent) of first names thought of as female-appropriate are only given to children whose sex category is female and almost all (97 per cent) of first names seen to be male-appropriate are only given to children whose sex category is male (Liebersohn et al. 2000; see also Herbert & Aylene 2014). First names are therefore widely recognized as a robust indicator of the sex and/or gender of the bearer. We used the online application programming interface (API) tool Genderize (see [genderize.io](http://genderize.io)) to reach decisions about the gender attributes of first and middle names, and in a small number of cases, a Google search if a first or middle name was not included on Genderize. If no information could be found about the gender attributes of a first or middle name, it was coded as missing. Using these resources, first and/or middle names were coded as 'woman/girl', as 'man/boy' or as 'gender neutral' (gender non-binary names). Cases of name change linked to gender transition were identified by comparing the gender attributes of the 'new' first name and/or middle name and the gender attributes of the 'old' first name and/or

middle name. We assumed applicants whose ‘new’ first name(s) had masculine gender attributes compared to their previous ‘feminine’ first name(s) were people who had gender transitioned from being a woman to a man. Likewise, we assumed that applicants whose ‘new’ first name(s) had feminine gender attributes compared to their previous ‘masculine’ first name(s) were people who had gender transitioned from being a man to a woman. Applicants whose ‘new’ first name(s) had gender neutral attributes we assumed had transitioned from a gender binary identity to a gender neutral or gender non-binary identity. Names were also removed from the dataset by coding into ‘name type’ (i.e. first name, middle name, surname). Through these steps, people’s names were excluded from the customized dataset and anonymity of applicants and/or subjects of enrolled deed polls was ensured.

The following key actions were taken in the wider project to clean data within the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and to prepare for analysis. First, removing from the original spreadsheet dataset of 15 976 categorial records cases that were duplicates, cases where there was more than a year’s discrepancy between application date of the deed poll and its publication date and cases which had missing values making up more than 50 per cent in all variables, leaving a total number of 15 568 records. Second, a numeric code was assigned to each unique categorial variable, including to values missing from categorial variables. Third, data were then analysed by using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 28 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). Descriptive statistics and frequencies were conducted to summarize features of name-changing within enrolled deed poll data and to highlight any potential relationship between variables. For correlation analysis, Chi-square tests were used to determine which associations were statistically significant because this is an appropriate statistical test to find the correlation between categorial variables in our data. In addition, crosstabulation tables (or two-way tables) were utilized to look at what the association is and find patterns of data (Yates, Moore, & McCabe 1999).

Among the total of 15 568 cases, 68.5 per cent of applications (10 665 records) for name change via enrolled deed poll in the United

Kingdom between 1998 and 2019 were made by an individual in relation to their own name, while 31.5 per cent of applications were on behalf of a child under the age of 18, and made by applicants who were either an individual, couples or organizations. Because this article focuses only on cases where an individual made changes to their own name(s) (we refer to these cases as ‘applicants’), 10 665 records were therefore used in subsequent analysis.

### **3. Results**

Results are based on analysis of a baseline of 10 665 records of people who changed their own names (‘applicants’) and percentages reported for each variable are calculated based on valid cases with non-missing values.

#### **3.1 Name changing and gender of applicants**

As shown in Table 1, people whose first names and/or middle name were coded as ‘woman’ were the majority of applicants seeking to change their own name(s) via enrolled deed polls (57 per cent), followed by those coded as ‘man’ (42.2 per cent). The gender of 94 applicants or 0.9 per cent of the total is neutral because their first and/or middle names did not align with gender binary first names which typically indicate if the bearer is a woman or a man.

**Table 1. Gender characteristics of name change applicants via enrolled deed polls in the United Kingdom, 1998–2019, frequencies and percentages.**

Gender	Applicant changing their own name(s)	
	Frequency	%
Woman (single applicant)	6 050	57
Man (single applicant)	4 477	42.2
Gender Neutral	94	0.9
Total	10 621	100
Missing*	44	
Total cases	10 665	

\* ‘Missing cases’ are those where the gender of the applicant cannot be determined from the information provided in the legal statements. Missing cases are different from ‘gender neutral’, where the first and/or middle names of the applicants did not align with gender binary first names which typically indicate if the bearer is a woman or a man.

### 3.2 Long-term trends in name changing and gender of applicants

To analyse long-term trends in name changing and gender of applicants over the 21-year period (1998–2019) covered by our dataset of records of enrolled deed polls, we first compared name change applications at two date points: 1998 as the start point and 2019 as the end point. As shown in Table 2, in 1998 there were more name changes made by applicants coded as men (53.4 per cent) than by applicants coded as women (45.1 per cent). Yet, this finding is reversed in 2019 where women are the majority of those applying to change their own name(s). Name changes by applicants coded as gender neutral were, in comparison, more consistent between the two dates.

**Table 2. Long-term trends in gender of applicants of name changing via enrolled deed polls in the United Kingdom, 1998–2019, frequencies and percentages.**

Applicant gender	1998		2019	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Man	71	53.4	695	40.9
Woman	60	45.1	988	58.1
Gender neutral	2	1.5	17	1
Total cases	133	100	1 700	100

### 3.3 Types of name change via enrolled deed polls

In the United Kingdom over the 21-year period between 1998 and 2019, ‘surname only’ was the majority type (57.6 per cent) of all name changes made by people changing their own name(s) via enrolled deed poll (see Table 3). Also, surname change involving other types of name change accounted for 77.5 per cent of all types of name changes. Eight per cent of changes were ‘first name only’, but 28.5 per cent of all types of name changes involved a first name change. ‘Middle name only’ changes were 5.6 per cent of non-surname changes, but 30 per cent of all types of name changes involved a middle name change. Also, 7.2 per cent of all name change cases were related to all parts of name (i.e. surname, first name, and middle name).

**Table 3. Types of name change made by applicants via enrolled deed polls in the United Kingdom, 1998–2019, frequencies and percentages.**

Name change type		Frequency	Percentage
NON-SURNAME CHANGE	First name only	859	8.0
	First name & middle name	945	8.9
	Middle name only	597	5.6
	Total		22.5
SURNAME CHANGE	First name & surname	475	4.4
	First name & middle name & surname	764	7.2
	Middle name & surname	885	8.3
	Surname only	6 139	57.6
	Total		77.5
Missing		1	
Total		10 665	100.0

### 3.4 Association between gender of the applicant for name change and type of name change

The null hypothesis is that the type of name changing and the gender of applicant, as indicated by first and middle names, are not associated with each other – they are independent variables. To test this hypothesis, we conducted a Chi-Square test on 10 620 valid cases of people changing their own names (44 missing cases of applicant gender and one missing case of name changing type are excluded).



**Table 4. Chi-Square Test results for applicants' gender and type of name change via enrolled deed polls in the United Kingdom, 1998–2019.**

Chi-Square Test		
		Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square (df)	180.255 <sup>a</sup> (12)	<.001
Likelihood Ratio (df)	152.569 (12)	<.001
Linear-by-Linear Association (df)	18.138 (1)	<.001
Number of Valid Cases	10620	
Missing cases	45	

<sup>a</sup> 1 cell (4.8 per cent) have expected count less than five. The minimum expected count is 4.14.

The result from Table 4 shows that the Pearson Chi-Square value is 180.255 with degree of freedom (df) = 12 and  $p < .001$ . Because the  $p$ -value is very small and smaller than the standard alpha value (0.05), we can reject the null hypothesis that asserts the gender of the applicant of name change and the type of name change are independent of each other. In other words, the type of name changing via enrolled deed poll and the gender of the applicant of name change are associated with each other. Besides, only one cell (4.8 per cent) of the expected count is less than five and the minimum expected count is 4.14. The results meet the assumption of the Chi-Square test, i.e. 'no more than 20 per cent of the expected counts are less than 5 and all individual expected counts are 1 or greater' (Yates, Moore & McCabe, 1999: 734), and are therefore valid.

Now taking a closer look at the association between type of name change and the gender of the applicant of name change, it can be seen in Table 5 that for all gender categories, changes involving a surname was the type changed the most. Yet the change of surname only was even more common among applicants coded as woman (61.5 per cent) than among those coded as man (53 per cent). Where name change involved either first name only, first name and middle name or middle

name only, there are only small differences between the percentages of women applicants and men applicants.

**Table 5. Gender of applicant of name change by type of name change via enrolled deed polls in the United Kingdom, 1998–2019, percentages.**

Applicant gender	Name change type								
	NON-SURNAME				SURNAME				
	First name only	First name & middle name	Middle name only	Total	First name & surname	First name & middle name & surname	Middle name & surname	Surname only	Total
Man	8.7	9.3	6.5	24.5	4.3	8.2	10	53	75.5
Woman	7.6	8.4	5.0	21	4.2	6.2	7.1	61.5	79
Gender Neutral	9.6	14.9	3.2	27.7	20.2	18	4.3	29.8	72.3

There were only a small number of cases (94) where applicants are coded as gender neutral over the 21-year period between 1998 and 2019 (see Table 1). With this caveat in mind, we note that applicants of name change whose gender was coded as neutral were somewhat more likely to change their first names only (9.6 per cent), as well as to change their first name and middle name (14.9 per cent) but were somewhat less likely to change their middle name only (3.2 per cent), compared to other gender categories. In cases involving surname change, applicants whose gender was coded as neutral were, compared to other gender categories, more likely to change their first name and their surname (20.2 per cent), and more likely to change their first name, middle name and surname (18 per cent) but less likely to change only their middle name and surname (4.3 per cent). In cases of surname only change, gender neutral applicants were the least likely to do so (29.8 per cent) of all the gender categories (61.5 per cent woman, 53 per cent man).

### 3.5 Long-term trends in types of name changes and gender

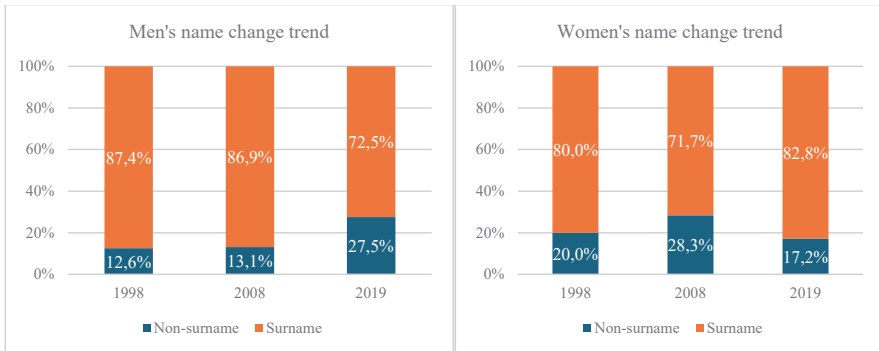


Figure 1. Long-term trends in types of name changes by women and men via enrolled deed polls, United Kingdom 1998–2019.

To examine gendered trends by types of names changed, we compared three date points: 1998, 2008 and 2019. As shown in Figure 1, focusing on applications of people coded as woman or man, changes involving surnames accounted for a large majority of all types of name changes. Women and men both made more surname changes than non-surname changes at each of the three date points.

Next, in a closer examination of long-term trends in the types of name changes by those applicants coded as men, women and gender neutral, we use a two-date point comparison between 1998 and 2019 (see Table 6). In 1998, there was little difference between women and men in the types of name changes made. Name changes involving a change in surname are prominent for both women and men applicants (and 64.8 per cent of men and 73.3 per cent of women made changes only to their surname) while under 20 per cent of women and men applicants made non-surname changes. In comparison, and although numbers of cases here are very small, of the two applicants in 1998 categorized as gender neutral (see Table 2), one changed their first name and their middle name (non-surname changes) and the other one changed only their surname.

**Table 6. Types of name changes via enrolled deed poll by gender, 1998 and 2019, percentages.**

Applicant gender	1998								
	NON-SURNAME				SURNAME				
	First name only	First name & middle name	Middle name only	Total	First name & surname	First name & middle name & surname	Middle name & surname	Sur-name only	Total
<b>Man</b>	7.0	2.8	2.8	<b>12.6</b>	4.2	11.3	7.1	64.8	<b>87.4</b>
<b>Woman</b>	11.7	6.6	1.7	<b>20.0</b>	1.7	5.0	0	73.3	<b>80.0</b>
<b>Neutral</b>		50.0		<b>50.0</b>				50.0	<b>50.0</b>

Applicant gender	2019								
	NON-SURNAME				SURNAME				
	First name only	First name & middle name	Middle name only	Total	First name & surname	First name & middle name & surname	Middle name & surname	Sur-name only	Total
<b>Man</b>	8.2	9.8	9.5	<b>27.5</b>	4.6	7.9	10.6	49.4	<b>72.5</b>
<b>Woman</b>	5.3	6.3	5.6	<b>17.2</b>	4.0	5.3	9.3	64.2	<b>82.8</b>
<b>Neutral</b>	5.9	5.9	5.9	<b>17.7</b>	5.9	41.2	5.9	29.3	<b>82.3</b>

Compared to 1998, for all genders, the proportion of applications involving only surnames is lower by 2019. Also in 2019, a higher percentage of women changed only their surname (64.2 per cent) compared to men (49.4 per cent) and compared to the 17 people (see Table 2) categorized as gender neutral (29.3 per cent). Amongst men applicants there was an increase in changes to non-surname elements names in 2019 (a doubled figure compared to 1998). This proportion of men applicants (27.5 per cent) is significantly higher than people of other genders changing non-surname elements (17.2 per cent of women and 17.7 per cent of gender neutral). In 2019, the 17 people (see Table 2) categorized as gender neutral applicants made more changes to all parts of their name (41.2 per cent) than either women (5.3 per cent) or men (7.9 per cent).

### 3.6 Gender transition and name changes

We explained earlier how we identified cases of name change linked to gender transition in our dataset. To recap, an applicant whose ‘new’ first name(s) had ‘masculine’ gender attributes compared to their previous ‘feminine’ first name(s) were assumed to have gender transitioned from being a woman to a man. Likewise, an applicant whose ‘new’ first name(s) had ‘feminine’ gender attributes compared to their previous ‘masculine’ first name(s) were assumed to have gender transitioned from being a man to a woman. Applicants whose ‘new’ first name(s) had gender neutral attributes compared to their previous first names, we assumed to have gender transitioned to a non-gender binary identity.

**Table 7. Name change via enrolled deed polls in the United Kingdom attributed to gender transition before and after 2004.**

Name change cases attributed to gender transition			
Between 1998 and 2004	Count	25	
	%	5.9	
After 2004 up to 2019	Count	396	
	%	94.1	
Total	Count	421	
	%	100	

Almost all (94.1 per cent) of cases of name changing via enrolled deed polls that were attributed to applicants’ transitions in gender identity, as reflected by first and middle names, occurred between 2004, when the Gender Recognition Act was passed, and 2019 (Table 7). Just under six per cent of cases of name changing due to gender identity transition took place between 1998 and 2004.

As shown in Table 8, in the 21-year period under our scrutiny, the majority of people (76.9 per cent) changing their name(s) in connection with transition in gender identity tended to make only a non-surname change. Sixty-six per cent of these people changed their first name and also changed their middle name at the same time, and 10.4 per cent changed their first name only. In 17.1 per cent of name change

cases attributed to transition in gender identity, a change was made to all parts of their name (first name, middle name and surname).

**Table 8. Gender transition and type of name change via enrolled deed polls in the United Kingdom, 1998–2019, percentages.**

Non-surname			Surname		
76.9			23.1		
First name only	Middle name only	First name & middle name	First name & surname	Middle name & surname	First name & middle name & surname
10.4	0.5	66	5.5	0.5	17.1

### 3.7 Changes over time in types of name changes linked to gender transitions

In 1998, there were only a total of three cases of name change linked to gender transitions. Of these, a single case was of a person who had changed their first name and middle name to gender neutral names. Further, one woman applicant chose to change their first name and middle name, and one woman applicant changed all parts of their name.

**Table 9. Type of name change via enrolled deed poll linked to gender transition, 2019, United Kingdom, frequencies and percentages.**

Applicant gender	2019					
	NON-SURNAME			SURNAME		
	First name only	First name & middle name	Total	First name & surname	First name, middle name & surname	Total
Man						
Count	5	20	26	-	2	2
%	17.9	71.4	92.9		7.1	7.1
Woman						
Count	4	34	38	-	5	5
%	9.3	79.1	88.4		11.6	11.6

In 2019, there were total 72 cases of name change by applicants that can be linked to gender transitions (Table 9), a significant increase compared to 1998. Most men and women applicants (92.9 per cent and 88.4 per cent) choose to change non-surname elements of their name when they changed names following gender transitions. Specifically, 71.4 per cent of men applicants changed their first name and middle name and 17.9 per cent changed their first name only. For women applicants, 79.1 per cent changed both first name and middle name and 9.3 per cent changed their first name only. However, women applicants for name change linked to gender transitions tended to change all elements of their names, more so than for men. While only 7.1 per cent of men applicants (those whose 'old' first name(s) had feminine attributes) changed all elements of their name (first name, middle name and surname), this figure is nearly doubled (11.6 per cent) for women applicants (those whose 'old' first name(s) had masculine attributes).

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 Gender and name changing

Our first research question asked: Is there an association between name changing and gender? Our analysis of name changing and the gender of applicants of enrolled deed polls shows that name changing is associated with gender. Women are the majority of applicants (57 per cent) changing their own names by enrolled deed poll in the United Kingdom between 1998 and 2019 (Table 1). Moreover, as shown in Table 2, over time between 1998 and 2019, women replaced men as the majority of applicants of name change. The finding that women are the majority (57 per cent) of applicants of name change via enrolled deed polls – over and above the slight majority (51 per cent) of women in the United Kingdom population (UK Government 2023) – supports claims that, in late modern societies like the United Kingdom, it is women's name-based identities that are now somewhat more flexible and open to change, particularly when compared to men's

(Pilcher 2016; 2017). Of course, a key aspect of greater flexibility in women's name-based identities is the still prevalent norm (at least in the United Kingdom) that, on marriage to a man, women should drop their birth surname and take the surname of their husband (e.g. Duncan, Ellingsæter & Carter 2018). However, given the strength of the normative expectation that women change their surname when they marry a man, and the ease by which such a name change is evidenced, it is very unlikely enrolled deed polls would be used by heterosexual women for this purpose (although, as we note below, divorced women may be using enrolled deed polls to establish a new identity by reverting back to their pre-married surname). Given that records of enrolled deed polls are very *unlikely* to be capturing heterosexual women's surname change at the time of their marriage to a man, the difference in women's and men's surname change behaviour in the United Kingdom is actually much larger, more significant and more enduring over time than even our study of enrolled deed polls shows.

#### 4.2 Types of names change and gender of applicants

Our second research question asked: Are there any gendered patterns in the types of names being changed? Our comparison of the types of changes made by people to their own names using an enrolled deed poll in the United Kingdom 1998–2019 shows that 'surname only' changes are the majority type (57.6 per cent; see Table 3). This finding is in keeping with our earlier argument that, linked to the importance of surnames as markers of familial and other collective affiliations of belonging (Finch 2008) that are also gendered (Pilcher 2017), surname changing is a more widespread practice in the United Kingdom than first and/or middle name changing. The lower incidence of first name and/or middle name only changes, and of surname changes also involving a first name and/or a middle name shown in Table 3, confirms that, compared to surnames, it is first names that hold more significance and have sustained longevity for personal identity (Aldrin 2016; Alford 1988), including in terms of (re)doing gender (Pilcher 2017).



Very few (7.2 per cent) cases of enrolled deed polls between 1998 and 2019 resulted in changes to all parts of an applicant's name (Table 3), a finding that suggests the combined importance of multiple name components for an individual's identities, including gender identities. Most people using enrolled deed polls to change their own names retained at least one element of their previous name. Name change may indicate identity elasticity (Emmelheinz 2012) or as argued by Strauss (1959), a desire no longer to be the kind of person their previous name signified, but wholesale name change (first name, middle name and surname) was the choice of only a minority of users of enrolled deed polls in the United Kingdom. Our findings here show that name-based identities including in relation to gender are a more complex phenomenon than is implied within arguments that insist on the inherent flexibility of identities under conditions of post-modernity (e.g. Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2001; Giddens 1991).

Our analysis established a correlation ( $p = <.001$ ) between the gender of the applicant of the name change and the type of name change made via enrolled deed polls (Table 4). For the period 1998–2019, among women changing their own name, 61.5 per cent changed their surname only, compared to 53 per cent of men and 29.8 per cent of people coded as gender-neutral who changed a surname only (Table 5). Surname change implies a complex negotiation of identities of belonging and familial ties, as well as pressures from social values, norms, and traditions (Bechsgaard, in this issue; Finch 2008; Grønstad, in this issue; Patterson & Farr 2016; Mills 2003). The finding that women as applicants of enrolled deed polls were the most likely gender group to change only their surname further confirms the enduring character of the enhanced importance of surnames changes for women's identities that we note above. Here, records of enrolled deed poll most likely capture women's surname change linked to marital breakdown: women who divorce may be using enrolled deed polls to revert back to their pre-married surname and thereby realign their surname-based identities in terms of who they 'belong' to. This can be interpreted as a practice through which women are (re)doing their

gender identities within the otherwise patriarchal culture of family surnaming predominating in the United Kingdom.

Nonetheless, it was surprising to find that, of men changing their names via enrolled deed poll, over half did so to change only their surname (Table 5). As we noted earlier, little is known about men and surname change (although, see Grønstad and also Bechsgaard in this issue) and there is plenty of scope for its more detailed examination. In the United Kingdom, for a man to change his surname at marriage to woman is against the norm; perhaps some men use enrolled deed polls to officially evidence and declare their choice to do so precisely for that reason. Others may use enrolled deed polls to realign their family affiliations of belonging for other reasons or do so to change (e.g. anglicize) their own surname to discard a stigmatized identity and thereby achieve cultural assimilation (Bursell 2012; Fermaglich 2018; Khosravi 2012). Cultural assimilation through surname change may also help account for some of the surname changes made by women.

In our study, cases of name changed by applicants coded as gender neutral or gender non-binary gender are small (Table 1). With this caveat in mind, it was surprising to find that, among people making a change to their own name who were categorized as gender-neutral, in 2019, a higher proportion made changes only to their surname (29.3 per cent) as those who made changes only to their first name and/or middle name (17.7 per cent; see Table 6). Perhaps having non-gender binary first and/or middle name means that the name-based identities of some of these individuals also extended to flexibility and creativeness in terms of the family affiliation signalling function of surnames. Further research is needed to better understand 'surname only' changing by people with gender-neutral first names and/or middle names. In terms of non-surname changes (that is, changes to first names and/or middle names), applicants in the gender-neutral category were the most likely of all gender groups to have made this type of name change in the 21-year period between 1998 and 2019 (Table 5). Applicants in this gender-neutral group were also the most likely to change all component parts of their name (first name and surname, and first

name, middle name and surname), a finding that further suggests enhanced flexibility and creativeness in their name-based identities and a desire to completely transform how names signal who they 'are' and who they belong to.

### **4.3 Long-term patterns in types of name change and gender of applicants**

In terms of long-term patterns in types of name change between 1998 and 2019, a growing proportion of non-surname changes (first and/or middle names) were made by men (Table 6 and Figure 1). This is a finding which suggests that, for men who made name changes via enrolled deed polls, first names and middle names became increasingly important as markers of their identity over this period and surnames less so. For women, the pattern over time is rather more even. Nonetheless, name change involving surnames continued to be the main type of name change between 1998 and 2019, and this is especially so for women.

### **4.4 Types of name changes linked to gender transitions**

As shown in Table 8, of name changes attributed to gender transition of the applicant, 76.9 per cent related either to first name only, middle name only or to first and middle name. Although the number of cases is comparatively small, these findings underline the continuing importance of first names and middle names in communicating gender identity (Anzani et al. 2023; Obasi et al. 2019; Pilcher 2017; Aldrin 2015, Sinclair-Palm, in this issue; Wentling 2020). At the same time, our findings here suggests that while people who have gender transitioned may change their first names to reflect their gender identification, most choose to retain their surnames. This can be interpreted as retention of familial affiliation and feelings of belonging signalled by their surnames. Data in Table 8 show that women applicants (whose 'new' and 'old' first names indicated a transition from a masculine gender identity to a feminine one) were more likely than men appli-

cants (whose ‘new’ and ‘old’ first names indicated a transition from a feminine gender identity to a masculine one) to change all parts of their name including their surname. This finding suggests that, compared to men applicants, women applicants for name change linked to gender transition may have a stronger desire for a completely new identity.

We also demonstrate that rising numbers of people used enrolled deed polls to change their own first names and/or middle names linked to a transition in gender identity, from three cases in 1998, to 72 cases in 2019 (Table 9). Although the number of cases is small, we are the first to be able to show the effect of the Gender Recognition Act 2004 on name changing and gender identities in the United Kingdom. According to our data analysis, the majority of name changes via enrolled deed polls that we attributed to gender identity transitions took place after 2004 (Table 7). The Act seems to have empowered people to change their names via enrolled deed poll, especially their first names and middle names, to better communicate their gender identity, both to themselves and to others. It is a clear example of the transformative potential of legislation change for enabling the (re)doing of gender identities in contemporary societies.

## 5. Limitations

First, our study is limited because it draws on records of enrolled deed polls which may not be representative of official name changing behaviour in other national contexts. Second, our findings may not be representative of official name changing behaviour in the United Kingdom either – enrolled deed polls are the most complex, lengthy and costly process way of achieving an official change of name in the United Kingdom and they also result in a public declaration of name change. Third, the typical wording of enrolled deed polls, and we suspect, administrative processing of records, altered during our census period of 21 years between 1998 and 2019. These are changes which may have impacted on the gender comparisons we made. For example, there is an unexplained abrupt and significant increase in records

of enrolled deed polls after 2014, while changing in their wording over time resulted in some missing values otherwise used in our data analysis. A fourth limitation is that we relied upon first names and/or middle names to position applicants into one of three categories of gender identity (women, men, gender neutral) and to ascertain if a change of names was linked to a transition in gender identity. This method has limitations because, although a robust indicator of sex and/or gender, forenames do not accurately signal a person's identity in every case. Further, and irrespective of the gender attributes of their forenames, we cannot know the preferred gender identification of anyone who used an enrolled deed poll to change their own name(s). Fifth, the nature of the dataset meant that we were unable to determine the reasons why people chose to use enrolled deed polls to change their names rather than any of the other available procedures. Similarly, we were unable to infer (other than in cases where transition in gender identity was indicated) the specific social, cultural and communicative motivations that might explain why applicants had changed their names. A sixth limitation relates to name changing linked to gender transitions and related to gender neutral first names. Here, our findings are based upon a relatively small number of cases. Last, it should be recognized that, by ending our analysis of records of enrolled deed polls on 31 December 2019, we were not able to consider any effects the COVID-19 pandemic, subsequent lockdowns and disruption of everyday normality, may have had on people's name-based identities and the incidence of name-changing including any variations by gender.

## 6. Conclusion

People in many contemporary societies do choose to change their names (e.g. Bechsgaard, in this issue; Bursell 2012; Fermaglich 2018; Scherr 1986; Sinclair-Palm, in this issue). We have shown that, in the United Kingdom over the period 1998 and 2019, rising numbers of people used enrolled deed polls to change some parts or, in a minority of cases, all parts, of their own names. This trend in name changing

via enrolled deed polls in the United Kingdom points to the increasing complexities of identities, including gender identities, in contemporary societies and to their inextricable links with names. People change their names as they navigate the tessellation of their identities over time, thereby (re)creating, confirming and projecting who they are as embodied named beings (Pilcher 2016). In this article, we have especially focused on name changing in relation to gender identities, comparing women, men and people with gender neutral names and/or those whose name change implied a gender identity transition. Our analysis shows that there are gender differences in who uses an enrolled deed poll in the United Kingdom to change their own name, and in the types of names that they changed. These findings evidence the importance of names as social and cultural resources used by people in contemporary societies in the (re)doing of gender identities, and in the communication and confirmation of these identities.

Our analysis of a large-scale longitudinal dataset of 10 665 records, drawn from a previously overlooked source of data on name changes, quantifies for the first-time gender differences in name changing in the United Kingdom, including by types of names, and so makes a significant contribution to the limited literature on name changing. Our analysis also extends in several respects sociological understandings of the complexities of gender identities linked to names in contemporary societies. In contrast to studies focused on capturing individual experiences of specific types of gender-related name changing and/or by particular gender groups, our analysis of applicants of name changes made by enrolled deed polls facilitates both a wide and a detailed understanding of gender differences in the incidence of name changing and in different types of name changes made by women, men, people with gender neutral first names and/or middle names and/or people whose first and/or middle name changes indicate a transition in gender identity. While our study shows interesting, gendered patterns in surname changes, it also demonstrates that, on the whole, and compared to surnames, first names and/or middle names are much less likely to be changed. People wanting to change the gender identity signalled by their first names are the important

exception here. First names and/or middle names, then, continue to be more intimately and more securely linked to people's gender identities than surnames which signal (still changeable but more stable) identities of belonging. More qualitative research is needed on people's identity investments in these different types of names, including in terms of gender (although, see Anzani et al. 2023) so that we can better understand the social, cultural and communicative motivations that lay behind changes made to them. Further research on surname changing and gender identities should explore surname changing by men, address surname changing by women related to divorce or relationship breakdowns and consider surname changing by people with gender neutral forenames and/or people who are transgender. For example, is it the case that, as our limited data suggest, women who are transgender are more likely to have changed their surnames as well as their first names, compared to men who are transgender, and if so, what does that reveal about the name-based identities of transgender women and transgender men? Furthermore, future research could also consider gendered implications of the kinds of surnames that are preferred or changed by women and men. For example, what are the gendered patterns in the retention or change of surnames where elements may indicate gender of the applicant (e.g. Andersson or Andersdottir, Navratil or Navratilova)? In addition, from a United Kingdom perspective, we need to understand more about what motivates people to use enrolled deed polls to change their names, rather than use other procedures. Finally, there is a pressing need to examine the effects of COVID-19 and its disruption of social and cultural life on name changing behaviour including in relation to gender.

## **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The lead author received financial support for the enrolled deed poll study from the School of Social Sciences at Nottingham Trent University, United Kingdom.

## Acknowledgements

In addition to co-authors Hannah Deakin-Smith and Hanh Thi My Nguyen, Dominic Holland and Delihlah Chadwick-Smith provided research assistance on the wider study of records of enrolled deed drawn on in this article.

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