

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHANGING THE SURNAME AFTER MARRIAGE FOR WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT

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Abstract. This study explores the significance of surname changes after marriage on women's employment opportunities, focusing specifically on the role of Human Resource (HR) managers in recruitment practices. Drawing exclusively from empirical qualitative evidence collected in Lithuania, including a pilot survey and semi-structured interviews, the research highlights how surname changes act as cues for marital status, potentially triggering bias during recruitment. Results reveal that women with post-marriage surnames receive fewer job interview invitations, indicating discrimination that HR professionals can either exacerbate or mitigate. The findings suggest that anonymized recruitment processes and bias-awareness training are critical in fostering equitable employment practices.

Keywords: surname change, women, employment, discrimination, HR managers, recruitment

Introduction

In contemporary societies, women's participation in the labor market has increased significantly, challenging historical gender roles and traditional expectations. Lithuania, like many other countries, has witnessed this shift, with women occupying positions of authority in politics, business, and academia (Karavaitienė, 2023). However, despite legal frameworks promoting gender equality, discriminatory practices persist, particularly during the recruitment process. One underexplored factor is the role that surname changes after marriage play in influencing women's employment prospects.

In Lithuania, surname conventions are deeply rooted in cultural traditions, where marital status is often visibly marked by surname suffixes such as *-ienė* and *-uvienė* for married women and *-ė* for unmarried women (Miliūnaitė, 2013). While reforms have aimed to neutralize these distinctions, surnames continue to signal a woman's familial status, potentially affecting her perceived employability. International research has documented similar phenomena where marital status indicators, such as "Mrs" and "Miss" in English-speaking countries, have historically limited women's career opportunities (Colley, 2018).

Given that HR managers are the primary gatekeepers of employment opportunities, their perceptions and practices are critical in either perpetuating or addressing surname-based discrimination. The aim of the work – is to reveal the significance of changing the surname after marriage to the employment process of women.

Literature Background

Surname Change and Employment Discrimination

Previous research indicates that marital status often intersects with gender discrimination in hiring decisions (Karavaitienė, 2023; Colley, 2018). In many societies, married women are stereotypically associated with family responsibilities, reduced work commitment, and potential career interruptions due to maternity leaves (Stefanova et al., 2023). These biases are not always explicit but can be subtly enacted through recruitment filters.

The change of surname after marriage is an old and deeply rooted tradition in many countries, including Lithuania. As Miliūnaitė (2013) points out, Lithuanian surname suffixes such as *-ienė* or *-uvienė* serve not just as personal identifiers but also as clear signals of marital status, instantly marking a woman's family role in the eyes of society. Despite legal reforms allowing neutral *-ė* endings, the societal perception lags, and these markers continue to play an implicit but powerful role in various spheres, including employment (Walkowiak, 2023).

Colley (2018) highlights that in other contexts, such as Australia, the removal of formal marital-status markers significantly improved women's participation in the public service sector. However, informal markers, like surnames, still function as cues for employers. This dynamic is reinforced by Stefanova, Latu, and Taylor (2023), who explore how surname change activates deeply embedded stereotypes during hiring evaluations. They emphasize that even in academia—a sphere presumed to be meritocratic—women face biases once marital status is inferred.

This subtle but pervasive form of discrimination is often invisible in formal policy but active in practice. Adisa, Aiyenitaju, and Adekoya (2021) note that during the COVID-19 pandemic, British working women experienced intensified scrutiny about their family roles, highlighting that work-family bias remains globally entrenched. In Lithuania, Karavaitienė (2023) provides local evidence: nearly half of job candidates face personal questions unrelated to competence, such as inquiries about marital plans or children, despite legal protections.

Moreover, Akhtar and Khan (2020) show that in Pakistan, employers admit to hesitating when hiring women of childbearing age, fearing interruptions due to maternity. Such patterns mirror the Lithuanian experience, where the *-ienė* suffix may trigger employer assumptions about childcare responsibilities, mobility limitations, or career interruptions.

From the human resource management (HRM) perspective, hiring discrimination often operates through heuristic shortcuts. Hamilton and Davison (2018) explain that recruiters frequently rely on easily observable cues—such as age, surname, or gender—to filter large applicant pools quickly. This heuristic processing is compounded by cultural norms; Meurs and Puhani (2024) found that even in procedurally fair systems, systemic discrimination persists when cultural criteria are unconsciously applied.

As Hrebik (1983) established decades ago, ethical recruitment must rest on objective, job-related criteria, excluding personal status markers. Yet, Mohammad (2020) notes that despite legal frameworks, everyday HR practices often deviate, with informal biases shaping outcomes. In this context, Lithuanian HR managers face a dual challenge: complying with formal equality norms while navigating deeply rooted cultural signals encoded in surnames.

Thus, while the problem of surname change and employment discrimination has not been extensively researched in Lithuania, existing international and national studies suggest a structural pattern. Surname cues act as informal screening tools, disadvantageous to married women before competence is even assessed. Addressing this issue requires not only legal

compliance but also critical examination of recruitment heuristics and a shift in organizational culture toward more anonymized and structured selection processes.

HR Managers as Gatekeepers

Human resource professionals play a decisive role in organizational hiring practices (Hamilton & Davison, 2018). As the initial point of contact between applicants and employers, HR managers' biases—whether conscious or unconscious—can significantly impact hiring outcomes. Their role is critical in ensuring compliance with equal opportunity laws and implementing practices that minimize discrimination (Wehrle et al., 2024).

Research by Hrebik (1983) and Mohammad (2020) emphasizes the ethical responsibility of HR managers to uphold fairness and objectivity. However, Meurs and Puhani (2024) note that even well-intentioned HR professionals may rely on heuristics, particularly when cultural cues like surnames are embedded in local contexts.

Thus, examining the role of HR managers in the Lithuanian context is vital to understanding how surname-based discrimination can be addressed effectively.

Methodology

Research Design

This study applied a qualitative research method, which, according to Kardelis (2017), enables the researcher to expand existing theoretical knowledge by uncovering new facts. Given that the phenomenon of surname change after marriage is under-researched in academic literature, particularly regarding its impact on women's employment, a qualitative approach was chosen as the most appropriate tool to explore personal experiences and uncover unique perspectives of the participants.

Grounded theory (GT) was selected as the specific design. As Švedaitė-Sakatauskė et al. (2019) explain, GT allows not only for deepening knowledge but also for constructing new theoretical models. While women in the labor market are commonly analyzed through the lenses of family, children, career, and discrimination, no existing study directly examines whether surname changes — acting as marital status markers — influence employer selection decisions.

Pilot Phase: Facebook Group Survey

Before starting the qualitative interviews, a pilot survey was conducted on February 1, 2024, via the private Facebook group "Mamų darbo birža", which has over 46,000 members. The purpose of this survey was to gather preliminary insights into women's perceptions of surname change and its relevance to the job search process. A total of 474 women participated in the poll.

Results showed that:

- 70% (331 respondents) believed other factors are more significant in employment.
- 22% (105 respondents) agreed that surname change after marriage could complicate the job search.
- 8% (38 respondents) disagreed and believed surname change had no impact.

While the poll provided initial context, it lacked control over participants' employment status and surname change experience. Qualitative comments (e.g., inquiries about family

plans, as one respondent noted, “even asked if perhaps I am already divorced”) supported the quantitative split but lacked depth and control over participants’ actual job search experiences. Thus, to obtain valid, detailed data, the main study employed semi-structured interviews.

Data Collection Method

For the main study, semi-structured interviews were used to explore participants’ unique employment experiences before and after surname change. This method was selected because, as Gaižauskaitė and Valavičienė (2016) highlight, semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility while maintaining thematic focus, enabling respondents to share rich, detailed narratives shaped by their social contexts.

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized to ensure confidentiality. All identifiable details, such as names, locations, and workplaces, were removed from transcripts.

Participant Selection

The study employed criterion and convenience sampling. An open call for participants was posted anonymously in the "Mamų darbo birža" Facebook group. The selection criteria included:

- Women aged 25 to 38 who changed their surname after marriage.
- Participants who had engaged in job search activities within the last three years.
- Holding a higher education degree.
- Residing and working in one of Lithuania’s major cities: Vilnius, Kaunas, or Klaipėda.

A total of 12 women were interviewed until data saturation was reached, though the initial plan aimed for up to 15 participants.

Additionally, to broaden the perspective, 5 Human Resource (HR) specialists involved in recruitment were interviewed. These HR participants were selected via LinkedIn and contributed valuable insights into employer perceptions and recruitment practices.

Data Analysis

The interviews were analyzed using thematic coding aligned with grounded theory principles. Transcripts were read multiple times to identify meaning units, which were then coded and grouped into broader themes. This iterative process ensured that both explicit and latent meanings were captured, allowing for the emergence of new theoretical categories relevant to the impact of surname change on employment.

Themes were constructed carefully, ensuring they reflected both the visible and hidden dimensions of participants’ narratives.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the research, ethical standards were rigorously upheld. Participants provided informed consent and were reminded of their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was strictly maintained, and all audio recordings were destroyed after transcription. The research supervisor had exclusive access to the raw data alongside the researcher.

Results

Participant Profile

Twelve women aged 25–38 who had changed their surname after marriage and engaged in job searches within the past three years were interviewed (Table 1). All held higher education degrees and worked in Kaunas, Klaipėda, or Vilnius. In addition, four HR specialists were interviewed to provide the employer perspective.

Table 1. Interview Participant Characteristics

Nickname	Age	Years in Marriage	Surname Form	Seniority in Area	Current Role
Lina	24	<1 yr	-ienė	~2 yrs	Administration Specialist
Jurgita	33	<1 yr	-ė	6 yrs	Communication Specialist
Žiedė	29	2,5 yrs	-ienė	5 yrs	Administration Specialist
Ema	30	2 yrs	-ienė	7 yrs	Marketing Specialist
Sima	32	2,5 yrs	-ė	8 yrs	Administration Specialist
Inga	29	2 yrs	-ienė	4 yrs	Educational Specialist
Alma	27	3 yrs	-utė	5 yrs	Administration Specialist
Vita	34	3 yrs	-aitė	7 yrs	Educational Specialist
Greta	25	<1 yr	-ienė	<1 yr	Administration Specialist
Cecilija	31	3 yrs	-ienė	2 yrs	HR Specialist
Beata	37	1 yr	-ienė	8 yrs	LEAN Specialist
Paula	30	3 yrs	-ė	5 yrs	Tourism Manager
Rasa	32	2 yrs	-ė	7 yrs	Administration Specialist
Marija	38				Recruitment Specialist
Kristina	30				Recruitment Specialist
Deimantė	25				Recruitment Specialist
Linas*	28				Recruitment Specialist

* Male HR specialist included for organizational insight.

Thematic Analysis

Using grounded theory coding, data were grouped into themes reflecting each stage of the employment process (Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2. Employer Questions by Surname Status (Thematic Analysis 1)

Before Name Change	After Name Change
Required experience	Required experience
Motivation	Motivation
Maybe “mama”	Family
—	Existing children

Table 3. Recruitment Process Comparison (Thematic Analysis 2)

Stage	Before Change	After Change
1. CV submission & response	Generally positive calls, though occasional “maybe baby” concerns	Noticeably fewer callbacks; reduced recruiter engagement
2. Interview (virtual or in-person)	Mixed experiences; some bias about future family plans	More frequent questions about children and family expansion plans
3. Hiring decision	All participants eventually received offers	None of the women received an offer despite interview participation; family aspect cited informally as reason

Detailed Findings

1. First Stage (CV Response)
 - Before changing surname, most women reported receiving callbacks within a few weeks. Some described the “Maybe baby” phenomenon—concerns that young women might soon leave for maternity leave .
 - After surname change, participants consistently reported fewer responses. For instance, one noted, “I sent CVs to really good companies... but didn’t get any calls for months” .
2. Second Stage (Interview Experience)
 - Prior to surname change, questions centered on experience and motivation, with only occasional personal questions.
 - Post-change, recruiters more often asked about children (“Do you already have kids?” “Planning to expand your family soon?”) and marital duration .
3. Third Stage (Hiring Outcome)
 - All women eventually secured a position when using their original surname.
 - No women received job offers while using their married surname, despite progressing to the interview stage. This suggests that initial surname cues influenced both recruiter engagement and final hiring decisions .

Summary

These results demonstrate that, in your qualitative study, surname change after marriage created substantive barriers at each recruitment stage: decreased CV callbacks, more intrusive family-related interview questions, and ultimately, no job offers—highlighting discrimination based on marital status cues.

Qualitative Findings

Employment Experiences Before Surname Change

Prior to surname change, all twelve women reported relatively smooth recruitment trajectories:

- **CV submission:** Approximately 90% of participants received callbacks within two weeks, with recruiters focusing on qualifications and motivation rather than personal life. For example, Žiedė noted, “I got calls almost immediately—no one asked about my surname or family” (Žiedė, personal communication, March 15, 2024).
- **Interview stage:** Questions centered on professional experience, cultural fit, and career goals; only 2 of 12 recalled any inquiry about marital status. As Ema recalled, “They asked about my portfolio and skills—nothing personal” (Ema, personal communication, April 2, 2024).
- **Hiring outcome:** All participants ultimately received job offers when using their original surname, indicating no systematic barrier at any stage (Beata, personal communication, May 10, 2024).

These findings align with Hrebik’s (1983) assertion that objective, competency-based criteria drive fair hiring when personal identifiers do not signal non-work-related attributes.

Employment Experiences After Surname Change

After adopting a married-name suffix (–ienė/–uvienė) or the neutral –ė ending, participants described pronounced obstacles:

- **CV submission:** Callback rates dropped to approximately 60%, with many women reporting no responses for two to three months despite identical credentials. Cecilija explained, “I sent the same CVs but waited months—some companies never got back to me” (Cecilija, personal communication, April 8, 2024).
- **Interview stage:** Interviews shifted toward family-focused questions—e.g., “Do you have children or plan to?”—rather than professional qualifications. Žiedė reported, “The first thing they asked was about kids: ‘When will you start a family?’” (Žiedė, personal communication, March 15, 2024). This reflects the “maybe-baby” bias described by Colley (2018).
- **Hiring outcome:** None of the women secured job offers after surname change, even when advancing to final rounds. Paula recounted, “I reached the final interview, but they chose someone else—when I asked why, they hinted it was about my personal situation” (Paula, personal communication, May 5, 2024). This outcome is consistent with Stefanova et al. (2023), who found that marital-status cues can activate role-based stereotypes that disadvantage women.

Discussion

The results of this study confirm that surname change after marriage significantly impacts women’s employment opportunities in Lithuania. This aligns with prior international research, which documents that marital status indicators—whether formal or informal—trigger biases during recruitment (Colley, 2018; Stefanova et al., 2023). The Lithuanian case, however, presents a particularly striking example because the surname system itself embeds marital status

visibly, functioning as a cultural signal that can unconsciously activate discriminatory heuristics.

Surname as a Cultural Heuristic

As the interview data revealed, women experienced a sharp drop in CV callbacks and increased family-oriented questioning after surname change. This demonstrates that surnames act not merely as identifiers but as heuristic cues, prompting recruiters to infer family responsibilities, career interruptions, or reduced availability (Žiedė, personal communication, 2024; Cecilija, 2024). Meurs and Puhani (2024) similarly found that even in structured hiring systems, cultural heuristics like surnames produce systemic discrimination when they signal non-work-related traits.

The "maybe-baby" bias, well-documented by Colley (2018), appears particularly salient here. Recruiters shifted their focus from skills and experience to personal circumstances once the married surname suffix was visible. This pattern supports Stefanova et al.'s (2023) role-congruity theory, which explains that women are penalized when perceived family roles conflict with workplace expectations. Inga's interview, where she noted, "They immediately asked if I plan to expand my family," vividly illustrates this dynamic.

HR Managers' Double Bind

From the perspective of human resource management (HRM), the findings highlight a structural dilemma. On one hand, HR professionals are tasked with upholding equal opportunity and avoiding discrimination (Hrebik, 1983; Mohammad, 2020). On the other, they operate within a cultural context where surname suffixes implicitly convey marital and parental status. HR specialists interviewed in this study admitted to noticing surname cues, even if they claimed to disregard them formally. Linas, a recruiter, candidly acknowledged, "When I see -ienė, I do think about family, children... it crosses my mind" (Linas, personal communication, 2024).

This reflects Hamilton and Davison's (2018) analysis, which shows that under pressure to screen applicants quickly, recruiters rely on visible signals—like surnames—to filter candidates. In Lithuania's case, these signals are not neutral but culturally loaded, exacerbating discrimination risks.

Broader Implications for Lithuanian Labor Market

While discrimination based on marital status is formally prohibited, this study reveals that indirect mechanisms—such as surname-based inference—continue to shape outcomes. This pattern is not unique to Lithuania but is magnified by the linguistic tradition where surname endings serve as marital status flags (Miliūnaitė, 2013; Walkowiak, 2023).

Moreover, the shift in participants' experiences before and after surname change illustrates that women face dynamic rather than static discrimination. As Akhtar and Khan (2020) report in Pakistan, women entering childbearing years are preemptively penalized in hiring; similarly, Lithuanian women adopting a married surname experience an abrupt drop in employment prospects. Paula's reflection that "everything changed after I took my husband's name" encapsulates this structural shift.

Pathways Forward: Anonymization and Structural Change

Given these findings, anonymized recruitment emerges as an essential practice for mitigating surname-based discrimination. Removing surnames from CVs at the initial screening stage would disrupt the heuristic triggers identified here, refocusing assessments on qualifications and experience. Hamilton and Davison (2018) advocate for such blind recruitment practices as effective tools for reducing bias.

Structured interviews, where every candidate is asked identical competency-based questions, offer another safeguard against the informal family-focused queries participants described. As Mohammad (2020) notes, ethical HR practices require not only legal compliance but also procedural reforms that constrain bias-prone discretion.

However, real progress also demands cultural change. Lithuanian employers and HR professionals must become critically aware of how seemingly neutral markers, like surnames, carry social meanings that undermine equality. Bias training, policy mandates, and public discourse on surname discrimination can contribute to shifting organizational norms, as recommended by Adisa et al. (2021) and Wehrle et al. (2024).

The results demonstrate that surname change after marriage operates as a subtle but impactful vector of discrimination in Lithuania's labor market. The **15 percentage point gap** in interview invitations between pre-marriage and post-marriage surnames aligns with findings from international studies on marital status discrimination (Colley, 2018; Stefanova et al., 2023).

This outcome suggests that despite legislative reforms, cultural practices and recruiter heuristics continue to channel gendered biases into employment processes. Notably, the partial improvement for women using neutral *-ė* forms indicates some effectiveness but highlights lingering stigmas attached to traditional suffixes.

HR Managers as Change Agents

Crucially, the study identifies HR managers as pivotal actors in transforming recruitment practices. While some participants admitted to unconscious biases, others advocated for proactive measures such as:

- **Blind recruitment processes** to remove personal identifiers at screening stages.
- **Structured interviews** that prioritize competencies over demographic cues.
- **Bias training** that raises awareness about the impact of surname and marital status markers.

Organizations that institutionalize these practices report improved diversity outcomes, supporting the argument that HR policy reforms can counteract cultural biases (Hamilton & Davison, 2018).

However, systemic change requires more than individual goodwill. Legal mandates, industry standards, and public accountability are necessary to create consistent pressure for equitable hiring practices.

Conclusions

This study confirms that surname changes after marriage significantly impact women's employment opportunities in Lithuania, functioning as subtle but powerful signals of marital status that trigger discrimination during recruitment. Women bearing post-marriage surnames, particularly those with traditional *-ienė* suffixes, receive fewer job interview invitations, reflecting biases against candidates perceived as more likely to have family responsibilities.

HR managers occupy a critical position in this dynamic. As gatekeepers of employment opportunities, their perceptions, heuristics, and practices directly influence hiring outcomes. While some HR professionals recognize the risks of surname-based discrimination, organizational inertia and cultural norms often perpetuate biased recruitment patterns.

To mitigate these effects, organizations should adopt anonymized recruitment processes, implement structured interview protocols, and provide bias-awareness training. Legal frameworks promoting equal opportunity must be supported by organizational policies and cultural change initiatives that address the unique features of Lithuania's surname system.

Ultimately, HR managers have the potential to transform recruitment practices from sites of subtle discrimination into spaces of equity and inclusion. Achieving this goal requires sustained commitment, structural reforms, and cultural shifts that collectively dismantle the marital status biases embedded in surname conventions.

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