

YEAR OF THE WEDDING

Here Comes the ... Broom?

The “bride” and “groom” portmanteau is just one of the terms being used by couples seeking less traditional ways to define their unions.

By Julianne McShane

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When Gail Terman and Micaela Godfrey began planning their February 2020 wedding, Ms. Terman, a 33-year-old software engineer at Broadcom, knew she would call herself a bride.

But for Mx. Godfrey, who is nonbinary and uses the pronouns “ze” and “zir,” the term “bride” carried gendered associations of a woman floating down the aisle in a white wedding dress.

“I wanted to deal as little as I possibly could with being misgendered on my wedding day, which is supposed to be this big, happy celebration of us and our love and of us as individuals as well,” Mx. Godfrey, 31, said.

So Mx. Godfrey, who lives with Ms. Terman in Berlin, Mass., chose an alternative label: “broom,” a combination of “bride” and “groom.”

While the numbers remain small, planners are seeing more such requests. “Across the board, people are craving more inclusive language,” said Amy Shack Egan, the founder and chief executive of Modern Rebel, a wedding planning company in Brooklyn. “It’s more accepted now to be bold about breaking with tradition,” she said, specifically the “patriarchal tradition” that marriage is rooted in.

Stephanie Coontz, the author of “Marriage, a History” and the director of research and public education for the Council on Contemporary Families at the University of Texas at Austin, said that the use of gender-neutral language in speaking about marriage makes “a public statement that we are not going to fall into the so-called traditional idea of gender roles.”

Words that are traditionally used to describe key figures in weddings, including “bride,” “groom,” “bridesmaid,” “best man” and “flower girl,” are also rife with assumptions that may not reflect the gender or sexual identities of marrying people or their guests, according to Maria and Kirsten Palladino. The married couple, who live in Atlanta, together run Equally Wed, a digital magazine with a focus on L.G.B.T.Q. weddings, and Equally Wed Pro, an educational platform that offers a course in inclusivity for wedding and event planners.

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In addition to “broom,” “marrier” and “partner” are among the terms that have caught on among people who don’t want to use “bride” and “groom,” the Palladinos and Ms. Shack Egan said.

When Ms. Shack Egan married John Egan in November 2018, the couple “stayed away from ‘bride’ and ‘groom’ in all the lingo” about their union, opting for “partner” instead, she said.

Jacob Goldfinger and Jennifer Gaboury, who live in Brooklyn, have called each other “partners” since their non-legally-binding 2003 “commitzvah” ceremony in Manhattan, which was inspired by both the Jewish traditions with which Mr. Goldfinger was raised and the fact that their L.G.B.T.Q. friends couldn’t legally marry at the time. (When they did marry, in 2013 at City Hall in New York City, it was to get better health insurance before their son was born in 2015, Mr. Goldfinger said.)

“It never bothered me to refer to her as ‘partner,’” said Mr. Goldfinger, 51, an independent writer and editor. (Ms. Gaboury, 50, is the associate director of the Women and Gender Studies Program at Hunter College.)

But it has taken others by surprise: “I’ve had co-workers learn that I am married to a woman and then express surprise or confusion and ask why I referred to my ‘partner.’”

Additionally, “person of honor” and “flower child” have been adopted as more inclusive ways to refer to guests who may identify across the gender spectrum, as has “bachelorex party,” which is how Ms. Terman and Mx. Godfrey described the board-game-themed bash they held for members of their wedding party ahead of their big day.

Antonia Terrazas, a program coordinator at Duke University, and Hannah Boning, who works in the regulatory department at a medical device company, plan to marry in May in Chapel Hill, N.C.

They will call themselves “brides,” but Ms. Terrazas, 31, said that she and Ms. Boning, 29, are “always revising what we’re calling our wedding party” because it includes “people of multiple genders.”

“We’ll say ‘wedding party,’ or ‘brides’ people,” Ms. Terrazas said.

All of these terms, said Maria Palladino, are “just simple things that obviously take the gender out of it.” She identified as a “broom” at her 2009 wedding celebration in Georgia.

Historically, the language of marriage has evolved alongside social norms.

In the second half of the 20th century, as the second wave of the feminist movement unfolded, Sheila Michaels and other feminists campaigned for the widespread use of the honorific ‘Ms.’ to refer to women without defining them by their marital status. (It was not until 1986 that The New York Times began using “Ms.” for women whose marital status was unknown, or who preferred it. In 2015, The Times began using “Mx.,” a gender-neutral honorific.)

After the Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage in 2015, more businesses catering to L.G.B.T.Q. weddings began popping up, and wedding planners who weren’t already doing so “got a wake up call” about the need to use language specifying they were “L.G.B.T.Q.+ inclusive,” Kirsten Palladino said.

But even as some have started to embrace a more inclusive wedding lexicon, the industry still has a long way to go. Many vendors and wedding websites still use language that assumes marriage is always between a “bride” and “groom,” she said.

For vendors who want to become more inclusive, she recommends adopting what she calls “the golden rule of L.G.B.T.Q.+ inclusivity: Never assume anything.” Instead, she said to “ask open-ended questions” like what a couple plans to wear on their wedding day, rather than who will be the “bride” and “groom.”

Any forms or paperwork should also have a space for people to list their pronouns and how they’ll identify on their wedding day, Kirsten Palladino said.

Couples who want a wedding that reflects their most authentic selves should “analyze every tradition that people are throwing at you,” including the words associated with them, she added. “You don’t have to do things just because everybody’s been doing it for a thousand years.”

For Ms. Terman and Mx. Godfrey, that meant happily becoming a bride and a broom.

“We spent so much time making sure that we both felt the ceremony was reflective of our relationship,” Ms. Terman said. “We were like, ‘words mean things, and we mean things to each other, and we want to express this in a way that we like.’”

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