

EDITORIAL

Is a girl or boyfriend worth it?

This year's Christmas date night might have plenty of vacant slots if a recent survey on Japanese relationships is correct. Fewer young people than ever before say they have a girlfriend or boyfriend.

According to the poll in June this year by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, a record high 61.4 percent of unmarried men between 18 and 34 reported having no girlfriend, up 9.2 percentage points since 2005. Unmarried women with no boyfriend in the same age group hit a record 49.5 percent, up 4.8 percentage points. The very idea of having girlfriends and boyfriends seems to be on the way out.

The idea of marriage has not been discarded, though. Over 86 percent of men and 89 percent of women surveyed said they wanted to get married sometime. The key word there is "sometime," meaning perhaps, at a later time, under suitable conditions, if they happen to meet the right person.

Are Japanese no longer finding love to be an important pursuit even as they continue to crave the security and stability of marriage? Or have they just lost the energy to even try?

These seemingly contradictory findings require some examination. At best, the poll results show that the nature of intimate relationships before marriage is in a state of transition in Japan. At worst, intimacy has become irrelevant to most young people's lives. More than half of men and women said they did not even want to date anyone.

This lack of close relationships seems to resemble a sort of social "hikikomori" (shut-in) condition, in which one retreats from relationships if not from the world altogether. The reasons for not being in a relationship varied, according to the survey. More than 10 percent of respondents said the reason they had not married was that they did not know how to be in a relationship.

Relationships also reflect one's economic situation. Similar surveys in the past found that employees who were not full-time tended to be less hopeful about getting married than full-time employees. This was especially true for men, who reported that having a girlfriend depended on their employment status more than personal characteristics or other factors.

Then is it all about money? Or are there practical hurdles?

Past surveys also found that people in the 18-to-34 age group live with parents at rates well over 80 percent. Long work hours and overtime make it hard to find time for socializing and relationships.

With insufficient or irregular time off, many younger workers do not bother taking time to join social activities where they might meet new friends or partners.

Clearly, Japan's insistent work and financial pressures affect the quality of life and the nature of relationships.

This survey, the seventh of its kind, also found that many young people feel girlfriend/boyfriend relationships are simply not worth it. For many people in this age bracket, regular relationships leading to marriage take time away from enjoying their single life.

Women are concentrating more on work than in the past and report enjoying the freedoms of single life in ever-greater numbers. Men place more importance on work and hobbies.

From this point of view, marriage seems like a loss of freedom while single life has more merits. For all too many young people, getting married means giving up their cherished entertainments and youthful friendships. For many young people, the psychological relief, financial security and desire to have one's own family inside marriage have become secondary to extending one's single life.

Whether this shows a healthy indulgence in personal freedoms or a flight from social responsibility is open to debate, and it surely is debated around the kitchen tables of the families where single people live.

The poll results show that the concepts of girlfriend and boyfriend, and of marriage, have already changed. The traditional view of girlfriends and boyfriends as the first step toward marriage has largely changed. Dating seems more of a bother and marriage less inevitable than other lifestyle choices.

Allowing young people to enjoy the freedoms of single life is part of what every open and affluent society works for. Maintaining social cohesion and stability through important institutions like marriage, though, is also important.

If a majority of young people never experience intimate relationships, one wonders what the impact will be on their development. The character of a society based only on work and play, without emotional engagement, may turn out quite different from that in the past.

Japan may be facing a future with very different concepts of what relationships can be. Rather than express shock or disappointment,

society needs to search for new patterns of intimacy, friendship and marriage. After all, after the March earthquake, even if they did not have a boyfriend or girlfriend, the first thing everyone in Japan did was to get in touch with the people closest to them, whatever their relationship might have been.

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