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Japanese Women Shy From Dual Mommy Role

As Birthrate Keeps Dropping, Experts Worry About Growing Willingness to Do Without Children -- or Childish Husbands

By Blaine Harden
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TOKYO -- "I have never met a Japanese man who did not want me to be his mommy."

That is the reason, Takako Katayama says, that she has not married. At 37, she has carved out a comfortable life here in Tokyo, with her own apartment, a good job at a cable television network, and a network of family and friends.

She has not closed the door on marriage and children. When she meets girlfriends for dinner, they ask each other, "Where are the good guys?" But she refuses to settle for a man who works long hours, declines to share in child-rearing and sees marriage mainly as a way to acquire lifetime live-in help.

"I want a mature, equal-partner kind of marriage," she said. "Anyway, there are complete lives without a baby."

Therein lies a dismal prognosis for [Japan](#) and for many of the other prosperous nations of East Asia. In numbers that alarm their governments, Asian women are delaying marriage and postponing childbirth.

In Japan, the percentage of women who remain single into their 30s has more than doubled since 1980. The trend is similar in Taiwan, Singapore, [South Korea](#), and the booming Chinese cities of Shanghai and Beijing.

Feminine foot-dragging on the way to the altar has been identified by demographers as perhaps the primary reason for the region's plunging birthrates. Of the 10 countries or territories at the bottom of a 2008 CIA ranking of global fertility rates, six, including Japan, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong, are in the Asia-Pacific region. South Korea also ranks near the bottom.

"Women on Strike," a recent report on Japan's falling birthrate by the securities firm CLSA, noted that the number of children per married Japanese woman has held steady for three decades. "This suggests that the decrease in fertility is due almost entirely to an increase in women of reproductive age not getting married and not having children," the report said.

Regional leaders are waking up to the growing reluctance of working women to complicate their lives with children -- and with husbands who refuse to help raise them. A very high percentage of Japanese women eventually do marry, but by postponing it they narrow the window for bearing children.

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"We need to organize our society so that women and families will be able to raise children while working," Japanese Prime Minister [Yasuo Fukuda](#) said in an interview in May. "I think we still lack adequate efforts on that front."

This year, Fukuda's government is pushing a "work-life balance" program that addresses the country's famously punishing work ethic. It pressures companies to shoo workers (primarily men) out of the office at night. The intent is to improve the quality of family life and, in the process, make more babies.

The stakes are high here in the world's second-largest economy, which now has the world's highest proportion of people over 65 and lowest proportion of children under 15. According to a recent forecast, population loss will strip Japan of 70 percent of its workforce by 2050.

Like many other East Asian economies with a shrinking workforce, Japan desperately needs women to marry and have children while also continuing to work. But only about a third of women in Japan remain in the workforce after having a child, compared with about two-thirds of women in the United States.

Corporate discrimination against women, especially if they have children, remains rampant, despite laws that forbid it. Last year Japan ranked 91st in gender equality among 128 countries surveyed by the World Economic Forum.

Meanwhile, many Japanese men in their 30s continue to be consumed by their jobs. About one in four still works more than 60 hours a week. Just 0.5 percent of men take government-guaranteed parental leave. In Sweden, 17 percent do.

Most working women in Japan face a stark choice: the career track, in which they will acquire financial independence while remaining single and childless, or the family track, which makes them full-time mothers until they are in their mid- to late 40s.

Research on marriage in Japan shows that after a wedding, women have much less time of their own, while there is almost no change in the demands on men's time, said Yoshio Higuchi, a professor of workforce economics at Keio University in Tokyo. "The burden falls almost exclusively on women, and those single women who see that happening choose not to marry, for now, anyway," he said.

Higuchi said that in recent years, as single women have been sought after by a corporate Japan starved for young workers, they have gained more power and freedom in the workplace.

"For women, this has caused enormous change socially and mentally," he said. "Men, though, have not changed at all."

Katayama testifies to that. "Guys will allow a woman to express herself, but they do not want their position threatened," she said. "They want to stand above the girl."

Equally annoying, according to Katayama, is the rarely stated but almost universal expectation of Japanese men to be fed, clothed and picked up after. "I am willing to take care of and give comfort to a man whom I care about, but that does not mean I want to be his mother," she said.

Research here shows that after a divorce, men tend to feel unhappy and remarry quickly. Divorced women, though, are relatively happy and often delay remarriage.

Still, marriage remains almost universal in Japan. Only 4 percent of women older than 45 have never married. It is also exceedingly rare for women here to have children outside marriage (less than 2 percent of all births). The cultural taboo against single parenthood is far stronger

than in the United States, where about 37 percent of births are outside wedlock. Cohabitation is also rare in Japan, and single women almost never adopt.

"I don't know why one would want a child so much," Katayama said. "In Japanese culture, the point is not to have children, but to have one's own children."

Social pressure on women to marry has clearly eased in Japan. But being an independent single woman still carries a stigma, even in Tokyo.

When Katayama bought her studio apartment in 2002, she did not tell many friends. "I knew that it would scare away guys," she said.

While "[Sex and the City](#)" is one of her all-time favorite TV shows, Katayama says she remains astonished at how its female characters brazenly prowl around for men. "There is still a foundation in us [Japanese women] that thinks hunting for a guy is not ladylike," she said.

Katayama is well informed about Japan's declining population and the catastrophic implications for the economy. She knows there is a national childbirth crisis. Still, she said, until she finds a man who wants a wife, not just a mommy, there is nothing she can do to help.

Special correspondent Akiko Yamamoto contributed to this report.

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