



## Japan's women wary to wed

**It is nearly 15 years since Japan's economy ground to a halt, triggering a period of introspection about the country's values and its place in the world. In the first of a special series, BBC News Online's Sarah Buckley reports on women's changing attitudes to marriage.**

Multi-coloured collars, premium chews, and cat picture books line the shelves at a swanky emporium in Ebisu, upmarket Tokyo.

Veronique is just one of a string of establishments catering for a boom in Japanese dog owners.

But its success seems as much due to a rejection of marriage as a new-found love for the canine.

"There are lots of women who have dogs as their family or child," said Rie Shimozono, the shop's owner. "They carry the dog in a bag so that they are always spending time with it."

Gazing through the window was Kazoko Endo, with Fukusuke, her daschund, in tow. She is typical of an increasing number of 30-something women in Japan - successful, single, and childless.

"Of course we will get married to someone," said Kazoko, referring to her and her dog. But the very fact that she was not even dating at 38 suggested it was not a priority.

Twenty years ago, women like Ms Endo would have had a wedding ring on her finger and children at her feet.

But changing expectations, both of relationships and careers, mean women across Japan, from school-leavers to members of the royal family, are grappling with a choice between traditional roles and modern freedoms.

The dilemma left more than one in four Japanese women aged 30-34 still unmarried, in 2000.

As a result women are having children much later, if at all. Japan's birth rate dipped to just 1.29 children per woman last year, one of the lowest in the developed world, from 1.54 in 1990.

Hiroe Shibata, 35, who works for a multinational pharmaceutical company, said her priority was her career.

"I'm not against marriage. It's just not happening to me now," she said, pointing out that long working hours followed by evening school left her with no time to date.

She said she loved children, but when asked if she worried about her biological clock, she replied: "If I have the time, then I'll have to think about it."

### No second best

**Their husbands work long hours; child care is limited; baby sitters are expensive; and if women decide to work part-time, they are paid less than half that of a full-time worker**

Even women with less pressing commitments did not seem in a hurry to tie the knot.

Yumiko Koshi, 33, was one of a number of women waiting to see pop idols Tokio last week. Bands originally marketed at teenagers are becoming popular with 30- and 40-something females unfettered by family life.

Yumiko said she wanted to get married, but only if she "found a nice guy". She said she had a boyfriend, but did not see him as marriage material. "It's fun to play with him but I don't think he's reliable enough as a husband. Sometimes he can't make decisions."

"Maybe I might have a lonely old age, but I can't just marry somebody not so good and have a hard time."

According to Sumiko Iwao, author of *The Japanese Woman*, many women no longer see marriage as an important goal.

"I guess they do not plan to stay single, they just don't meet with the kind of people they want to marry. They don't feel obsessed with being a housewife. If you find a good husband, that's fine, and if you don't, that's also fine.

"Japanese women tend to be very practical and very pragmatic. What are the benefits of getting married?"

For most people in Japan, where unmarried parents are still rare, the main "benefit" is children. And that is the point at which modern freedoms clash headlong with traditional expectations.

Hiroe Shibata explained: "If you get married, your parents expect you to have a baby. If you have a baby, it's going to be very difficult to manage your work and bring up children."

No-one is more aware of this tension than Japan's Princess Masako. On entry to the Imperial family she has been forced to give up her high-flying diplomatic career to concentrate on bearing a male heir. Earlier this year she was diagnosed with a nervous disorder due to stress.

Her unique role obviously brings its own strains. But many women are finding the sacrifice of hard-won economic success and freedom for childbirth tough.

"I think that being a mother reinforces the female role - once you have kids you have some responsibilities to be shared with your partner," said Hiroko Mizushima, a lawmaker specialising in gender equality for the main opposition Democratic Party of Japan.

However, Ms Mizushima cited government research, from 1995, which suggested full-time working men spent 26 minutes each weekday on domestic chores, compared to 3 hours, 18 minutes by full-time working women. The data may now be outdated, but Ms Mizushima said the balance had not changed.

Other disincentives are that their husbands work long hours, child care is limited; baby sitters are expensive; and if women decide to work part-time, they are paid less than half that of a full-time worker.

#### **FEMALE FACTS**

Japan ranks 38 in a UN measure which monitors female wages and public power  
Baby sitters cost about \$18 an hour  
1998 research shows 0.16% men took paternity leave

Ryuko Ishikawa, a family psychiatrist, believes 30-something women are not prepared to "repeat their mothers' mistakes" in settling for the role of housewife. But she said many of her female clients'

ambitions were not supported by their husbands.

She referred to the Japanese saying 'deru kugi wa utareru' - the 'nail that sticks out will get hammered'. It is used to denote the person who upsets the social norm.

"Now, women are becoming 'deru kugi' - are sticking out. There's very few males who would say 'that's right, we have to support you.' Instead they (the women) are being hammered," said Dr Ishikawa.

One of those women, caught up in the conflict between the present and the past, appears to be Princess Masako.

"I think Masako-san is a good example of the typical Japanese 'deru-kugi' - the capable woman. I don't think she's ill. I think she's normal," Dr Ishikawa said.

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