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No sex please — we're Japanese

By Paul Wiseman, USA TODAY

TOKYO — Junko Sakai was nervously looking forward to a romantic getaway with the man she'd been seeing. But when they arrived at a seaside hotel last fall, her beau requested separate rooms.



Masahiro Yamada, the Tokyo Gakugei University sociologist who coined the phrase "parasite singles", in a coffee shop in Tokyo May 17th.

By Andy Rain, Getty Images

Stunned, Sakai nonetheless anticipated a late-night knock on the door. It never came. "Nothing happened," the Tokyo writer says.

Nothing is happening with depressing regularity between Japanese men and women these days. Marriages, births and hanky-panky are all spiraling downward with troubling implications for the nation's future: A sagging birthrate means that fewer working-age people will be around to support a growing population of elderly: a social crisis looms.

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growing population of elderly, a social shame remains.

Only in Japan would a popular weekly newsmagazine deem it necessary to exhort the nation's youth to abstain from sexual abstinence: "Young people, don't hate sex," *AERA* magazine pleaded last month in a report detailing a precarious drop in sales of condoms and in business at Japan's rent-by-the-hour "love hotels."

More and more Japanese men and women are finding relationships too messy, tiring and potentially humiliating to bother with anymore. "They don't want a complicated life," says Sakai, who has written a controversial bestseller, *Cry of the Losing Dogs*, on the plight of unmarried Japanese thirtysomething women like herself.

And so, to an astonishing degree, men and women go their separate ways — the women to designer boutiques and chic restaurants with their girlfriends or moms, the men to karaoke clubs with their colleagues from work or the solitude of their computer screens to romance hassle-free virtual women.

"Men don't want to spend time with their girlfriends, especially shopping," says Takayuki Mori, 40, a single man who works for a Tokyo advertising agency. He says he isn't dating.

Better educated, more widely traveled and raised in more affluence than their mothers, young women no longer feel bound by the Japanese tradition that says a woman unmarried after age 25 is like a Christmas cake on Dec. 26 — stale. Men, meanwhile, seem intimidated and bewildered by assertive young women who are nothing like their moms.

As a result of the disconnect between genders, Japan, just emerging from a long economic slump, is experiencing a social recession in:

•**Marriage.** Japanese are postponing marriage or avoiding it altogether. Weddings dropped last year for the second straight year. Fifty-four percent of Japanese women in their late 20s are single, up from 30.6% in 1985. About half of single Japanese women ages 35 to 54 have no intention to marry, according to a survey in January by the Japan Institute of Life Insurance.

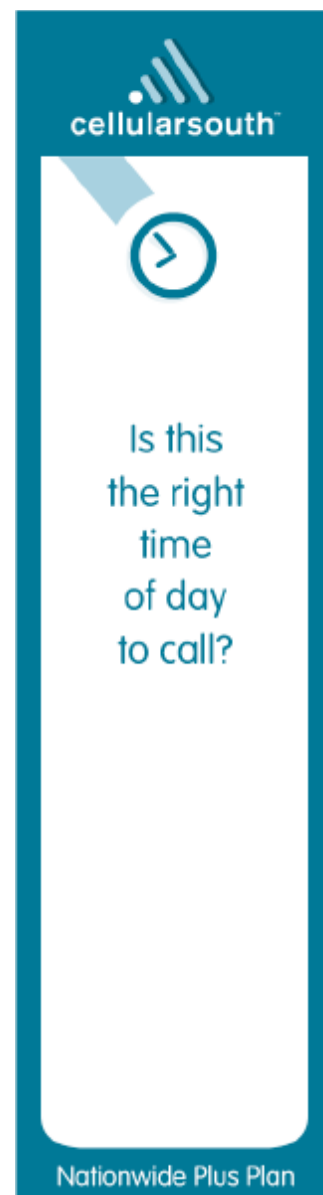
•**Births.** Just 1.1 million babies were born in Japan last year, the third straight decline. The average Japanese couple now produces just 1.32 children, well below the minimum 2.08 needed to compensate for deaths. As a result of plummeting birth rates, Japan's population is expected to peak in 2006, and then decline rapidly.

•**Sex.** In a 2001 survey, condom maker Durex found that Japan ranked dead last among 28 countries in the frequency of sex: The average Japanese had sex just 36 times a year. Hong Kong was next to last with 63. (Americans ranked No. 1 at 124 times a year.)

AERA reports that condom shipments are down 40% since 1993 (probably in part because Japan finally legalized birth-control pills in 1999) and love-hotel check-ins are off at least 20% over the past five years. What's more, an increasing number of those visiting love hotels aren't there for romance, *AERA* says; they've found that love hotels offer the cheapest access to karaoke machines and video games.

I won't get married!

Over tea in the sunlit lobby of the Akasaka Prince Hotel near the Imperial Palace in



downtown Tokyo, and later over soba noodles and chicken yakatori at a nearby restaurant, Japanese writer and television personality Yoko Haruka describes the shortcomings of love and marriage Japanese-style. The husband works long hours and carouses into the night with his pals from work. The wife is expected to stay home, clean house and take care of kids. If the children behave badly, she's a bad mother. If her husband has an affair, she's a bad wife.

The author of *Kekkon Shimasen* (I Won't Get Married!), Haruka abandoned her own plans for marriage a decade ago when she realized her fiancé wanted her to give up her career and lead the traditional life of a Japanese housewife. She says Japanese men sometimes propose to women with lines like: "I want you to cook miso soup for me the rest of my life." Not surprisingly, Japan's increasingly educated and well-traveled young women are not impressed.

"I'm not expecting men will change," Haruka says.

Her assistant, Miho Higuchi, who has kept silent throughout the conversation, suddenly blurts out: "Never again!" A mother of three, she divorced her husband because he refused to do anything to help her clean house and take care of the kids.

In fact, Japan's divorce rate rose steadily to 2.3 divorces for every 1,000 people in 2002 from 1.3 in 1990; it appears to have dropped a bit last year, partly because fewer people have been getting married. (The divorce rate in the USA was 4 per 1,000 people in 2002.)



As for men, they seem bewildered by the rising assertiveness of Japanese women.

"Men are getting weaker," says Takayuki Tokiwa, 23, a student at a Tokyo vocational college. "Women don't have to rely on men anymore. They can live on their own."

Masahito Wakauchi, 24, would seem to be a good catch. He has fashionably wavy hair and a good job with an advertising agency in Tokyo. Is he dating? Wakauchi shakes his head sadly.

"It's very, very difficult" to meet women these days, he says.

Rather than risk rejection or summon the energy to maintain a modern relationship, many Japanese men simply pay for affection in the country's ubiquitous hostess bars and brothels.

Others prefer virtual women online to the real kind. "They seem to find the relationship cumbersome. ... You have to be attentive to your partner," says Kunio Kitamura, president of the Japan Family Planning Association's Family Planning Clinic. "A quick way to get satisfaction is so-called cybersex."

In fact, as many as a million young men — mostly teenagers, but increasingly older men as well — suffer from what is known here as *hikikomori*. It's a condition in which they seclude themselves in their rooms for weeks at a time (though the causes seem to go well beyond fear of women to traumatic experiences from the past, such as being bullied at school).

But most young Japanese seem to enjoy the single life. In 1973, a Japanese government survey found that the happiest people in the country were those over age 60. A similar survey 24 years later found that the happiest people were in their 20s, and twentysomething women were the happiest of all: 77.7% said they were content with their lives. Maybe Gloria Steinem was right: Women need men like fish need bicycles.

Many young Japanese women live carefree lives, staying at home with their parents, paying little if any rent, letting their mothers cook their meals, clean their rooms and do their laundry. Many work dead-end jobs that don't pay much but don't cause much stress and give them enough spending money to buy designer handbags, shoes, clothes and jewelry and enough time to take overseas holidays with their girlfriends.

Emerging from the Louis Vuitton shop on Namikibashi street in the heart of the Ginza shopping district, Tokyo secretary Yukiko Matsumoto, 38, says she's happily single and living at home with her parents.

"I don't want to change my rhythms," she says. "Men expect women to stay home and take care of them." Not likely: Matsumoto travels abroad twice a year with her best friend and shopping companion, Terumi Yanagibashi, 38. They've already been to Hawaii together three times.

'Parasite singles'

A few years ago, Tokyo Gakugei University sociologist Masahiro Yamada coined the phrase "parasite singles" to describe young people who sponge off their parents and use their rent-free incomes to splurge on designer goodies, expensive dinners and trips abroad. It came from the 1997 Japanese horror movie *Parasite Eve* and applies to young, live-at-home men and women alike, though Yamada says the most carefree of the parasite singles tend to be women; the men are more serious about establishing careers and moving out on their own one day.

The phrase caught on. Some single women even printed up business cards defiantly describing themselves as "parasite singles."

In the past, it made sense for young people to leave home early. In the 1940s and 1950s, Japanese families were large. Staying at home meant sharing a room with brothers or sisters. But after decades of prosperity and falling birthrates, many young adults are pampered only children. Leaving home to marry means the drudgery of housework (especially for women) and the poverty of having to pay your own bills.

Sociologist Yamada says the single life in Japan isn't as blissful as it seems. For one thing, many young women still want to marry: They keep waiting for the perfect man — a rich handsome guy who either helps with the housework or can afford to hire help. But Prince Charming never quite arrives. "They hold on to the illusion they will find a man with a high income," Yamada says.

"The good men are all married," writer Junko Sakai says. "Those left behind are all nerds or without jobs or violent or not nice-looking."

And what happens to the parasite singles when their parents become infirm or die? Yamada says their future is grim. He cites one case study that he fears will be a model for the future. A woman lived with her parents until they died, inherited the family home but found that her job didn't pay enough now that her parents weren't around to foot the bill for groceries and other necessities. She ended up bankrupt after borrowing heavily in a futile effort to maintain her lifestyle.

The phenomenon of parasite singles also is creating a demographic nightmare. Japan now has about four working-age people to contribute to pension plans to support one of today's retirees. By the middle of the century, there will be just two workers for each retiree, which will create huge financial problems for the country.

Yamada says young men and women need to get more realistic. Men need to start helping with the housework and supporting their wives' careers. Women need to stop waiting for the flawless man who's never going to show up. "They've got to compromise," he says.

But it's going to take a lot of convincing to get Japanese women to give up their independence. Sakai says Japanese society still thinks there's something wrong with unmarried women over the age of, say, 30. She calls spinsters like herself "losing dogs." But fewer and fewer women care about tradition. "I know I'm a losing dog," Sakai says, "but I'm quite satisfied with my life."

Contributing: Naoko Nishiwaki in Tokyo

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