

The endless marriage-hunting merry-go-round

Naoko Iwanaga / Yomiuri Shimbun Staff Writer

The recent rise in so-called konkatsu (marriage-hunting) activities has left more and more people drained from repeated failures, with some even developing emotional disorders.

In 2010, 47 percent of men and 33 percent of women in their early 30s in Japan were unmarried--three times as many as 40 years ago. About 40 percent of single people are said to be actively hunting for a spouse via matchmaking services and speed-dating parties.

A 44-year-old woman from Osaka Prefecture was one such lady--that is, until late last year when she was rejected by her 30th man. She was so exhausted after meeting the man for tea, after an initial online introduction, that she could only fling herself down on the bed after returning home.

For about one month after the tea date she stayed at home, doing nothing. Both her parents had died in the past few years and her temporary staff contract had expired recently. Her yearning for marriage mounted day after day. The most recent rejection hit her deeply.

She recalled this painful period: "Imagining I'd have to start all over again, I just had no energy left. It could be the fatigue accumulated from all the long years, but I got so depressed and remained like that for a while."

After graduating from a two-year college, the woman registered with three different matchmaking agencies, hopping from one to the other. Currently, she is a member of several different online matchmaking services.

On Internet matchmaking services, users register and build their profiles, including job, annual income and hobbies. They then hunt for future partners by searching for specific criteria and e-mailing people who match them. Typically, these sites are free or charge a monthly fee of several thousand yen.

Looking for a partner online is a lot cheaper than conventional matchmaking agencies, with more choice--one of the largest sites boasts about 160,000 members.

The e-mails from male members dried up after the woman passed the age of 35, so she took the initiative to send e-mails. Whenever the exchange of e-mails stops, she gets depressed.

Once, she even found out the man she contacted was married. It is not uncommon for men to use online matchmaking Web sites to meet women for purely physical relationships.

Despite all the difficulties she has experienced in finding a husband, the woman cannot lower her standards. She hopes to meet a graduate of a prestigious university who earns more than 7 million yen a year. "I just want to have a normal family," she said.

At a time when 80 percent of single men earn less than 4 million yen a year, there doesn't appear to be a quick fix to this woman's marriage-hunting difficulties.

Toko Shirakawa, the journalist who coined the term konkatsu, feels there has been an increase in men and women suffering from the stress of not being able to find a spouse, especially when they are making so much effort.

"Under the current economic slump, it's getting a lot more difficult to achieve the married life commonly seen in the Showa era [1926-89], in which men provided for the family and women stayed at home doing housework and raising children. However, many men and women still can't see outside of the conventional view on marriage, wishing for what they can't have," Shirakawa said.

"With the marriage-hunting boom offering more opportunities to meet the opposite sex, people tend to demand more from their potential partners. As a result, more people are taking less time to get to know someone. The more earnest you are, the more you get hurt, because you can't accept being rejected so easily.

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Clinics treating depression

To help treat the increasing number of people suffering from marriage-hunting stress, Kawamoto Mental Clinic in Sumida Ward, Tokyo, opened a specialist outpatient unit in 2009. Among its patients is a man having a hard time sleeping after being repeatedly turned down by women, and a woman who developed chest pains due to anxiety.

ety over her partner's indecisive attitude toward marriage.

Many patients suffer from depression and anxiety disorders. Hiroyuki Ono, 53, a consulting psychiatrist at the clinic, treats such patients with medication and counseling. Ono also treats patients at his own clinic in Higashi-Murayama, Tokyo, which opened last month.

"What's common with these patients is the anxiety and damage resulting from the impact of being turned down."

"When marriage hunting, people judge the opposite sex on various aspects, including personality and annual income. But without being told why they have been rejected, they tend to believe their whole personalities are at fault," Ono added.

So, what can marriage hunters do to overcome such stress?

"I advise them to make friends with whom they can share the marriage-hunting experience, and let it all out when they have a hard time. Also, it's better to take a break from these activities once in a while," Ono said.

Shirakawa also had some tips: "Behind marriage-hunting stress usually is concern about the future. If women learn to take work more seriously and men learn to manage housework responsibilities, they'll be able to live independently or maintain their jobs when married to support each other. By nurturing themselves this way, they can prevent future worries and get on the fast track to marriage."

The woman from Osaka Prefecture regained her mental strength by exchanging opinions with others on a blog for people like herself. Sharing disappointments with others and reviewing what to really seek in marriage seem to be practical prescriptions for marriage-hunting depression.

(Jul. 24, 2011)