

EDITORIAL

No reason to have kids

A Cabinet Office survey late last year found that more than 40 percent of Japanese feel there is no reason to have kids. That's the highest percentage ever. Of women in their 20s and 30s, more than 60 percent said they don't feel the need to have children after marriage. This increasing indifference to reproducing might shock family-minded people, but it also reveals many emotionally complex and practical concerns.

Clearly, women have achieved some of the freedom and equality promised by Japan's democratic institutions. Many women no longer feel obligated to fulfill traditionally prescribed roles. Feeling no shame at being childless and pursuing other goals can be considered a certain sort of liberation. The diversity of lifestyle choices and the acceptance of new attitudes are welcome, if slightly ambivalent, signs of Japan's social liberalization.

However, for many men and women in their 20s and 30s, not having children is more an economic than a personal choice. A record 45 percent of people agreed that women should continue working after they have children. But many couples are trapped between needing two incomes to support a family of three (or more) and wanting to have enough time for their children. The price of a good education in particular has become out of reach for many families. Maintaining the traditional family pattern of working father, stay-at-home mother, and an average of two children has simply become too expensive.

The poll also found 63 percent of respondents calling for increased government support to enable women to work after they have children. The government needs to address these child-rearing problems. All

workers need the security to take time off when needed for their children's care, their elderly parents' care or their own health. Second, expanding day care services can give more married couples more options. Japan may have great transportation and communication services, but the basic infrastructure for children is sorely lacking.

Many people are reacting to uncertainty about the future. The difficulties, expenses and pressures of raising children have never lessened. The recent economic downturn has made the choice to have children seem all the more infeasible. Having children also demands optimism and commitment, two elements that seem to be in short supply amid the current social mood.

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