
Japan's demographic time bomb

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As much of the planet contends with overpopulation, poverty and the resulting inevitable crises, one group is dealing with the opposite extreme. While it may be topical and funny to describe things as “1st world problems”, it by no means suggests they don't exist. Japan is facing the difficult-to-imagine threat of simply dying out as both a people and a culture.

While stories have swirled around for years about the negative growth cycle of the Japanese population, the government's first reaction was to deny the problem's existence. In light of how serious a plight the country now faces, all veils of secrecy have slowly fallen away. News articles have begun to appear with regularity, repeating frightening statistics and offering potential obvious causes. The fact remains that Japanese society has fundamentally changed and there really are no simple answers. Initially it was thought women may be avoiding or delaying pregnancies as a result of increased stature within the workplace. This has proven to be nothing more than a symptom of a society that has fallen out of love with the concept of love.

The statistics themselves are certainly alarming. When surveyed in 2013, 45% of 16 to 24-year-old women claim to have no interest in or “despise” sexual contact. The male respondents were less biased but still registered a segment of 25% that chose the same response. They even chose the term “despise”, which cannot be a good sign. This may seem alarming enough, but it is by no means the worst of the statistics that have been measured. When the age demographic is broadened, the outlook becomes even bleaker and highlights the duration of the problem. Since being surveyed in 1987, the percentage of the male population of Japanese citizens between the ages of 18 and 34 with no romantic ties to the opposite sex has risen from 49 to 61%. Over the same period, the female percentage rose from 39 to 49%. We can round off this number-heavy paragraph with the fact that a third of the Japanese population under 30 have never been on a date, or the fact that a quarter of 35 to 39-year-olds are still virgins, both of which are pretty hard to fathom in the modern world.

Certainly, the Japanese government has made numerous attempts to solve the problem, working from the seemingly most obvious solutions, only to slowly spiral into more and more obscure ideas as they desperately attempt to regain sociological balance. At first, finances were considered a potential pitfall, so the government began to subsidise each family US\$100 to US\$150 per month per child. This measure provided no discernible improvement whatsoever. Since then, the realisation has dawned that people of the opposite sex are simply no longer meeting or chatting, never mind heading out for a date. The Japanese government then allocated a US\$25 million annual budget in an attempt to incentivise people to meet. This budget is spent on parties, tours, dinners – literally any social event that may encourage mingling.

From creating an actual Department of Connections to government-sponsored dating sites that reward you for entering a conversation with a potential partner, the upshot of all this effort does not seem to have moved the needle on the current problem. Recent estimates suggest that the Japanese population will drop from the current 127 million to 87 million by 2060, and of that 87 million a total of 40% will be over the age of 65.

Possibly the clearest description of the Japanese crisis comes from a very unlikely source. Comedian Aziz Anzari has often used the foibles of the now digitally advanced would-be dater as material for his stand-up shows. The positive reaction from his audiences identified this as both a universal and highly topical social conundrum. To this end, he decided to pen his first novel based on the observations he had made across America, and also broadened the scope of the topic to include South America, Japan and France. Anzari's book, *Modern Romance*, is a mix of his observational

humour, existing statistics and a significant amount of qualitative research undertaken with a sociologist. Each location certainly has certain specifics, nuances and customs, but Japan shows a barely recognisable social system that seems bereft of any form of romance whatsoever, modern or otherwise.

Within these pages, a far more interesting and detailed description of life in Japan takes shape, showing not only a society that has lost interest in the opposite sex, but also one that has adapted to continue life without it. The book offers the first mention of “herbivore men”, a term that has become ubiquitous throughout Japanese society. Of the eligible bachelor population, it is estimated that “herbivore men” comprise 60% of the group. These men are described as disinterested in women or simply too shy to consider approaching one. The term may seem disparaging, but it is a label the individuals themselves seem quite comfortable with. When interviewed, they readily admitted that they were far more concerned with work and friends than even contemplating approaching a woman. To add to this obstacle, many of the men interviewed dismissed women who were open to being approached as morally questionable. They described how unthinkable it would be to take such a woman home and deeply disappointing their parents.

While the government attempts to halt this dramatic slide, Japanese society not only accommodates, but indeed profits, from this social malaise. An example is the rapid rise of social clubs where both men and women spend money for time with the opposite sex. Sex itself is clearly off the menu and prostitution is illegal in Japan. These social clubs simply provide someone to chat with. A surrogate girl or boyfriend who listens intently to your news about work, your frustrations and who will always congratulate you on your achievements. The idle chit-chat of relationships has now been outsourced. For those seeking a more physical solution, Japan has seen the rapid growth in the “Soapland” industry – but I think I will leave that for you to Google.