

# CELIBACY VS ADULTERY:

## what's really going on in Japanese SEX LIVES?

WORDS ANNEMARIE LUCK



JUST AFTER NEWS REPORTS CLAIMED THAT JAPANESE PEOPLE HAVE STOPPED HAVING SEX, AN ARTICLE REVEALED THAT **OVER A MILLION PEOPLE HAVE SIGNED UP TO ONLINE ADULTERY SERVICE** ASHLEY MADISON SINCE IT LAUNCHED IN JAPAN LAST YEAR. IS TECHNOLOGY CLASHING WITH TRADITION? OR IS THERE A BIGGER SOCIAL PROBLEM?

Yasue Yoshiike speaks in metaphors. It's a wonderful stereotype of Japanese culture, softening words to demonstrate a point in the most harmonious and inoffensive way. She's sitting on a postbox-red chair in her therapy room at Tokyo Counseling Services, drinking green tea and telling me what it's like to be married to a Japanese man. Her jet-black hair frames a face full of character and wisdom, plenty of which must have been garnered during the 30 years she's spent as a psychologist in both the US and Japan. 'Marriage is like putting two poles in a rapid current and connecting them with a net with which to catch fish,' she says. 'The fish represent maturity or personal growth. The further apart the poles are, the harder it will be to steady the net in the current, and the harder it will be to catch big fish. But bring each pole a little closer and it will be easier to work together for the prize.'

The point Yoshiike is making is one that therapists worldwide have been making for years: for any relationship to be fulfilling you need compromise and communication. But being married to a Japanese man means not being able to communicate your feelings, needs and desires. And never hearing his in return. 'Japanese men are self-centred, much like children. They don't have much empathy for their spouse. They don't think how to please their wives. They just seek their own satisfaction,' she says.

I ask her if this could be the reason behind Japan's 'celibacy syndrome', the much-discussed phenomenon that's been blamed for the country's economically worrying decline in population, prompting global headlines such as 'No sex please, we're Japanese'. 'It's one of the

reasons,' she agrees. 'Governmental statistics in Japan show that the number of married couples over 40 who don't have sex with their spouses is 40,8 per cent. The problem stems from the lack of communication. In Japanese culture, people are taught to keep things peaceful and avoid conflict. The result is that many wives feel dissatisfied but cannot express their feelings. They start to reject their husband sexually, which makes him feel disrespected and resentful. Slowly, the relationship deteriorates to the point where it is purely a practical arrangement, often with the wife sleeping in a separate bedroom with the children. In the end, they simply feel that having sex is too much hassle.'

Sex is too much hassle? Why, then, have more than a million people signed up to Ashley Madison – a website for married people seeking 'discreet affairs' – since it launched in Japan last year? 'Just because married couples are not having sex doesn't mean they don't have sexual desires,' says Yoshiike. I ask if she thinks sites like Ashley Madison are exacerbating the problem by giving people a convenient portal to get their cheating kicks; if technology is fiddling with tradition and breaking up families. 'No. The problem was there to begin with,' she says. 'All that websites like this are doing is highlighting it.'

Ashley Madison's founder, Noel Biderman, agrees. 'I'm often criticised for destroying marriages, but my response is this: you're telling me that my 30-second advert has more of an impact on a relationship than the 10 years the relationship has been going?' Biderman, who has been nicknamed The King of Infidelity, admits his site has had an impact on infidelity, but not in the way most people think. 'I don't think we have changed the path of men at all – men have

always sought out affairs. What we have facilitated is a much easier path for female infidelity. There's a levelling of the playing field, because women are now demanding sexual equality.' This is particularly relevant in Japan, where women have not enjoyed the same level of equality with men as women in Western countries do. But more Japanese women are entering the workforce and becoming independent. 'In the past, a woman was restricted – she could not support herself financially if her husband divorced her. So not only would women have to stay in an unhappy marriage, they would have to just accept that their husbands were cheating on them. Now, their inhibitions are being shed and technology is providing a way for them to pursue non-monogamous behaviour themselves.'

Biderman doesn't believe that Japan's decreasing population is a reflection of people's sexual desires. 'You can have very sexually active cultures that have no interest in procreating. The fact is, having children is an economic decision. It's also a huge commitment. Sex is still being pursued in Japan en masse; it's just being pursued as entertainment.' Which is nothing new, really. Anyone who's strolled around Tokyo's infamous Kabukicho suburb will know that sex as entertainment is a visible part of Japanese culture. Host and hostess bars line the streets, love hotels abound, sex shops clamour for attention, and money can buy you all sorts of bizarre things such as a pair of used panties.

So what, then, do we make of the teens and twenty-somethings who say they have no interest in any sort of intimacy with another human being? Who proudly introduce friends and reporters to their virtual girlfriend and say she is much easier to deal with? There is clearly no sex as entertainment going on in these 'tech relationships'. Yoshiike says that most of these people are part of Japan's *otaku* subculture, which refers to those who have an obsessive interest, most commonly with manga (comics) and anime (animation). 'They are lonely people,' she says. 'They don't have close friends, so technology has become a place where they can escape. In the past, it was more difficult for this kind of person to fill their time. Today, they can find entertainment and satisfaction online. But it's not real satisfaction.'

Taking it to extremes is the *hikikomori* – young Japanese people who retreat from society altogether. When I meet Yuki\* (29) and Kise\* (31), who work in Tokyo's buzzing fashion industry, Yuki tells me of a friend's brother who is one such recluse. 'He still lives with his parents but stays in his bedroom all day, only coming out when it's time to eat. Sometimes the family doesn't see him for days on end. He stopped going to school and refuses to talk to anyone.' Last year, the BBC reported that up to a million young people – mostly male – in Japan are thought to be *hikikomori*.

Yuki and Kise say that often the reason people withdraw is because of the very real problem of bullying in Japanese schools. Kise herself admits to having avoided going to school in the past because she felt like she 'didn't fit in'. 'There is a lot of social pressure in Japan. Pressure to do well in examinations, pressure to dress in expensive brands. I didn't have many friends at school because I didn't follow these "rules",' she says. She's also not following a traditional path in terms of her relationship – her long-term boyfriend is Swedish.

Says Yoshiike, 'Japanese people are taught from a young age: "Don't be the nail that sticks out". But it's like an ocean – there may be

calm on the surface but underneath there is turmoil. This frustration must come out in some way.' She believes bullying is affecting young men's self-esteem, making them weaker emotionally. On the other hand, women are becoming emotionally stronger, so they're gaining courage to speak up when they don't like something. 'The Japanese man cannot deal with this kind of conflict,' she says. 'He doesn't want to feel hurt. So he may choose to avoid a relationship altogether.'

Or he may choose to work longer hours, spend less time with his wife and get his ego boosted at a hostess bar. Chiharu Gotoh is a 33-year-old hairdresser who worked as a night receptionist at a hostess bar to make extra money. She tells me it's common for married men to visit these bars. 'Personally I don't understand why they would want to spend so much money on a fake romance.' (Some high-end clubs will charge you \$4 000 just to sit down.) She says most women she knows tolerate their husbands visiting hostess bars because they believe the girls who work there are 'professional', meaning they won't cross the line and have sex with the men.

But a former hostess interviewed by Jarrett Reynolds for Tokyo-based online magazine *Jagr-mag.com* paints a different picture.

**'What we have facilitated is a much easier path for female infidelity'**

'Basically all the clients are married,' she says. 'In Japan, most men have mistresses. The wives are meant to stay at home and take care of the kids. Once they finish a hard day's work, men want to go to a bar where they feel like a king, and sit with women who are beautiful and young and laugh at their jokes, and touch their boobs. Most of the clients have sex with the girls...'

They want to do what they can't do with their wives. They don't speak to their wives. It's really a double life they're living.'

Currently, the divorce rate in Japan is 24 per cent. While this may seem low in comparison with other countries, it's clear that many couples who remain married are unhappy. 'Almost all Japanese couples believe that staying in a marriage is important for the children, even if they don't function as a couple. They believe the family is more important than the individual,' says Yoshiike.

So the question is, how does a contemporary Japanese man or woman bridge the gap between traditional values and a modern lifestyle that's throwing all sorts of new demands and technologies into the mix? Ironically, perhaps the best answer comes from the man who is making a living from encouraging people to have affairs. It's an answer that's relevant to all cultures.

Biderman believes, 'We are in danger as a society of creating a fictional perception of sexuality. Almost a third of the internet content visited is porn, but sometimes having all this choice at our fingertips can lead to even more discontent. We need to look inward and get in touch with what we really want.' **mc**

Left The founder of the Ashley Madison website, Noel Biderman.



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\* NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED

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