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## Weddings without shame for Japan's pregnant brides

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By Elaine Lies

TOKYO (Reuters Life!) - Momoyo Nishiwaki is planning her wedding ceremony, complete with white dress and veil.

She is also six months pregnant.

Such weddings barely raise an eyebrow in Japan these days, where more than a quarter of all first babies are now conceived before marriage.

And instead of a hasty ceremony held in secret, many couples who are expecting now opt to splash out on the sort of wedding festivities enjoyed by their non-pregnant peers, a trend bridal salons have rushed to cash into.

"It seems to me that this kind of thing is usual," said the 39-year-old Nishiwaki, who said she knew of at least three weddings where the bride was pregnant before marriage.

"But I admit that I'm a little embarrassed at the thought of wearing a wedding dress with a big belly."

In 2004, almost 27 percent of firstborn Japanese babies were conceived out of wedlock, up from 12.6 percent in 1980, according to the Health Ministry -- leading in turn to a surge in "dekichatta kon," which roughly translates into "oops marriages".

The tendency of such couples to have lavish weddings is the result of a change in attitudes that once saw pregnancy outside marriage as scandalous for the woman's family.

"Many people in the past chose to have abortions," said Masahiro Yamada, a sociologist at Tokyo Gakugei University.

"But now with marriages getting later and people in long term relationships, they simply think why not get married?"

### SEXUAL LIBERATION

The parents of today's couples came of age in a more sexually liberated society, while a number of celebrities in recent years have announced pregnancies at the same time as their marriages, making the whole situation more acceptable.

In addition, the lot of a single mother in Japan is difficult both financially and socially, meaning few choose it.

From 2005, the demand for elaborate wedding celebrations from pregnant brides-to-be began to rise, and the wedding industry is fanning the interest with special services and wedding plans.

Bridal salons have also changed the name from "Oops Wedding" to "Congratulations Wedding" -- a pun on a Japanese euphemism for pregnancy -- or even "Double Happiness Wedding".

"We wanted to make it possible for couples who might not normally hold a wedding ceremony to have this chance," said Fumio Aoki, a sales manager at bridal salon Ladirb, half of whose 300 annual weddings involve a pregnant bride.

"We call it 'Double Happiness' wedding -- except for us in the wedding business, these ceremonies are 'Triple Happiness'."

The reason is simple: couples where the bride is pregnant want speedier ceremonies, within several months compared to six months for ordinary couples, meaning higher turnover.

Given that an average wedding involves some 70 guests and costs 3 to 4 million yen (\$24,000-\$32,300), this adds up.

Among the special touches in weddings for pregnant couples are nutrition-packed dishes for the bride and flowers without strong scents that might worsen morning sickness.

Wedding gowns with expandable waists are a given.

For couples who want a ceremony in the popular tropical settings, Watabe Wedding Corporation -- a national chain of bridal salons -- offers weddings in the southern islands of Okinawa to avoid the long flights not recommended for pregnancy.

"In Okinawa, the language is the same and people can also use their regular medical insurance if they have to," said Yuka Nakayama at Watabe of the "Chura Baby Plan," which also includes a special blessing for the baby.

Some Japanese believe these weddings are a clear improvement over traditional options such as arranged marriages, which some couples still choose today.

"With arranged marriages, you had no idea how the sex would be," said Tomoko Inukai, an independent social commentator. "At least these couples know everything's fine on that front."

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