

Why women like you are having ARRANGED MARRIAGES

If you can't face speed dating or trawling the internet to find The One, how about a bespoke husband-hunting agency? Stephanie Clarkson discovers that more and more of us are signing on the dotted line

Susie Ambrose, 41, walks into the party with the ease and confidence of a woman accustomed to making an entrance. The stylish blonde turns heads, as she moves assuredly through the crowd of guests, heading towards her target: an expensively suited, immaculately groomed, thirtysomething man. Within seconds, they are deep in conversation and it seems Susie has effortlessly bagged the most eligible male in the room. But Susie's interest is purely professional – she has just found a potential husband for one of her female clients.

Welcome to the modern-day arranged marriage. It's all about saving precious time in finding the man you want to spend your life with. Ambrose noticed there was a market for this when her work as a psychotherapist brought her into contact with many highly successful single women, whose work/life balance was so skewed in favour of work that it left them unable to meet anyone new, let alone a potential partner. 'The women I met were so burnt out due to work, they didn't have the time or energy to look for a husband – although many wanted to settle down,' she says. 'I had a hunch they reflected a much wider group of women.' And thus, Ambrose's company, Seventy Thirty (seventy-thirty.com), was born.

According to US trend-spotter, Marian Salzman, co-author of *Next Now: Trends For*

The Future (Palgrave Macmillan, £15.99), women in the States are increasingly likely to ask a third party – whether family member, close friend or matchmaking professional – for help finding a husband. 'There is a newfound interest in letting someone else solve the love dilemma,' says Salzman. 'We're on option overload and maxed out in terms of time. It makes sense to

'Many single women are too busy to look for love'

enlist the help either of those who know us best, or one of the new breed of sophisticated love hunters, to help us forge a satisfying match.' And now this cultural phenomenon is heading to the UK. As Ambrose says, 'If you want to find your

dream home, you go to an estate agent, so why not use a matchmaker to help find your dream partner?'

Why not, indeed. But who is this 21st-century woman, who's happy to hand over the search for a husband to a total stranger or, worse still, her mother? Are we talking about a small group of past-their-prime 'desperadoes', anxiously seeking ◀



someone to save them from being left on the dreaded shelf? 'Absolutely not,' says Salzman. 'The woman most likely to opt for assisted marriage is in her thirties, attractive, successful and sophisticated. She is motivated by the desire to be part of a couple and discusses her need for a partner the way others talk of career planning. And, being cash rich and time poor, she is willing to use every tool possible to find the right mate.'

Hence the rise in high-end services, such as Seventy Thirty. Ambrose currently has over 200 female clients on her books. The average age is 37 and all are looking for a husband or life partner. All clients (the service is available to both men and women) are given the services of a dedicated matchmaking specialist, who comes to their home to meet and vet them, and then carefully selects and presents profiles of people who are compatible. This kind of bespoke service doesn't come cheap – there's a one-off membership fee of £10,000 for unlimited matches with eligible singles across the UK.

'The name Seventy Thirty was born from research that found that successful people spend 70 per cent of their time working and only 30 per cent socialising,' says Ambrose. 'This epitomises my clientele. My average female client is a wealthy, high achiever in her late thirties, who works long hours. She doesn't have the time to trawl online dating sites, nor does she want to go to bars, looking for men. My clients aren't interested in dating for dating's sake. They want a long-term relationship and we help them achieve that.'

She must know what she's doing, because Seventy Thirty has seen five couples married so far this year alone. Sarah Williams, 30, a lifestyle consultant, from Cheshire, is one of them. 'When I joined, in May 2005, I was at the end of my dating tether,' she remembers. 'Without sounding desperate, I wanted to settle down and get married, but running my own business left me no time to look for anyone. When I did get an hour free, the only thing I wanted to do was relax in front of the TV. I knew exactly what I wanted in a man – someone equally career-motivated and financially independent, older than me and ready to consider having children – I just couldn't find him. As soon as I met Susie, I felt confident she could help. My expectations were realistic; I didn't expect her to find my husband instantly. But, just three weeks after

joining, I was sent Marcus' profile. He was a successful hedge-fund manager, six years older than me and, when I met him, we just clicked. He understood the pressures of a demanding career and had similar aspirations to me. Then I discovered he was kind, thoughtful and funny to boot! We had a very romantic courtship, were engaged by Christmas 2005 and married in February this year. When I joined the agency I thought £10,000 was a lot, but justified it to myself by thinking of it as an investment. In the end, it was a small price to pay for meeting the man of my dreams.'

Salzman argues that there is a new practicality to marriage, but adds that this is more socially and emotionally, rather than financially, led. 'Love and lust have become less linked,' she says. 'The new pragmatism means we partner up to combat loneliness, to increase our social currency and, because that's what it takes to be successful in the minds of many, both in the US and the UK.'

Research carried out by Facts International on behalf of Parship (parship.co.uk), a dating service based on establishing long-term partnerships through the use of psychometric testing, backs up this theory. Of 1,000 women

'New members are vetted, to ensure they're serious about long-term love'

questioned, only nine per cent said they were looking for a casual relationship, whereas 54 per cent wanted a committed or serious long-term relationship. When asked where they'd like to see themselves in five years

time, 47 per cent of women aged 25 to 44 said, 'married with children'. And, according to the latest figures from the Office for National Statistics, 103,810 women aged 30 to 44 tied the knot in 2005.

