

Inside Japan's dangerous, unregulated 'baby hotel' childcare industry^[1]

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EXCERPTS

If you think finding a good daycare center in the US for your kids is tough, try Japan. The country that 127.3 million men and women call home is stuck in a uniquely awful childcare situation—and thanks to the rise of unregulated, so-called "baby hotels," it's one that has led to the deaths of several infants.

In Japan, high demand means that securing a place at a public kindergarten or nursery that is subsidized by the government is extremely tough—especially in Japan's cities. According to the Japan Times, at the end of April 2015, 23,167 children couldn't get a place in any childcare facility. (Some parents that Broadly spoke to had been turned down by more than ten centers, even when they applied more than a year ahead.)

The result? Unauthorized nurseries that offer round-the-clock care for children from newborns to school age.

In October, 34-year-old Yusuke Tsunoda was arrested on suspicion of injuring four-month-old Rinto Idenawa, who later died from brain damage in December 2015 while staying at Chibikko Boy, a 24-hour baby hotel in Hiratsuka, Kanagawa Prefecture.

Rinto, who had been dropped off at the baby hotel at around midnight, was among 23 infants who had been left in the sole care of Tsunoda for the night. The center had been reported for violations six times since 2008, but continued to operate despite repeated warnings from the prefectural government.

Privately-operated baby hotels often charge more than government-approved childcare centers, and can be staffed by unqualified personnel. They are, however, still perfectly legal. According to statistics released in February by the Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare, there are 1,749 baby hotels in Japan that are responsible for 32,523 children.

In 2000, the Japanese government began to privatize and deregulate childcare, making it legal for businesses, individuals, and private preschools to open their own nurseries. In 2013, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's administration proposed emergency plans to increase the number of childcare facilities by 2019. But, as Rinto's case illustrates, increasing the number of centers does not mean increasing the quality of care.

The toddler's death is, sadly, not an unusual case. According to figures put together by the Cabinet Office, nine children died in fatal accidents in baby hotels in 2015 alone. In March this year, 14-month-old Kento died at the Kids Square Nihonbashi Muromachi center in Tokyo, less than a month after his parents began to use the facility. In the same month, a six-month-old girl also died in the middle of the night at the Kamata Children's House in Ota City, a ward in Tokyo.

Both of the girl's parents were in full-time, permanent employment, and had not been able to find a place in public childcare by the time their parental leave was over. They found Kamata Children's House online and paid the 24-hour nursery more than 60,000 yen (\$570) a month. Two members of staff were working at the center at the time of their baby's death; neither possessed any childcare qualifications.

Though fatalities at childcare centers are not exclusive to Japan, in the UK, where 24-hour facilities are rare, anyone working with children is legally required to undergo a DBS check (Disclosure and Barring Service). Nursery staff are required by law to gain a childcare qualification, and all childcare facilities are regularly inspected by the government agency Ofsted. Japan, in contrast, lacks similar regulatory systems, meaning that baby hotels offering low standards of care are able to slip through the net.

One woman, who spoke to Broadly on condition of anonymity, worked at a baby hotel in the prefecture of Nagasaki for five months. She described her workplace as "filthy."

"I'm still sad when I remember that time working there," she said. "I don't know if that baby hotel still exists or not, but I still think often about my experiences there, and about that baby hotel and the children I looked after. It left strong impressions and deep emotions with me."

She said that the center, located in Sasebo (the second largest city in Nagasaki) also failed to provide proper nutrition for the children. Food was not freshly prepared for the infants, and they ate the same "boil in the bag" convenience meals every day. "Many shocking things happen in baby hotels. At the same time, if these places didn't exist, even more horrible things might happen, I think."

90 percent of the mothers leaving their children with the baby hotel were sex workers or employed as hostesses and bar girls, she claimed. "One mom, I remember, had never worked in a sex industry job before but had been left with no other choice. She was really nervous and sad because she obviously didn't want to leave her child in a baby hotel."

The former employee recalls another incident involving a newborn child left at the baby hotel. There were no bathing or shower facilities at the center, and the staff did not clean the child properly after feeding him. His skin became inflamed and he ended up spending a night in hospital. The following night, she says, the baby was back at the hotel.

"Personally, I wish this type of baby hotel didn't exist, because the conditions were poor," she says, "but on the other hand, I totally understand that it's last resort for sex industry worker moms, who are often single parents."

Japan's baby hotels are also used by women of all industries who may struggle to access publicly-funded childcare, or may have to work long hours or during the night.

Toko Teramachi, a lawyer, certified social worker and expert on Japan's childcare system and administration, has worked with several parents who have lost their children in unauthorized childcare facilities. She mentions a horrific 2014 high-profile case, in which a nine-month-old baby died of heatstroke following neglect at a baby hotel in Utsunomiya City.

According to Teramachi, the nursery advertised itself with the promise of the "continuous presence of medical nurse, contract with doctor [sic], nutritionist support meals, and [having the] capacity to take sick children and provide overnight nursing." Their fee was 20,000 yen (around \$200) a night.

"Many of the clients of this nursery were doctors, and company owners who left their children when they have business trips," Teramachi explains. In reality, the center did not employ any medical nurses, doctors or nutritionists.

Teramachi says that Japan desperately needs a national screening system for people who want to work with children, similar to the DBS checks done in the UK. According to a recent article in Bloomberg, daycare workers make 214,200 yen (around \$1,858) per month, compared to an average worker's salary of 325,600 yen (\$2,824). A survey of over 31,500 childcare workers found that one in five was thinking of quitting, with low salaries cited as the number one reason. Unsurprisingly, few qualified people want to take on the job.

"One thing that Japan has to establish is a system to screen the previous criminal history or abuse incident history of people who work in the nursing industry, [such as] child minders, kindergarten teachers and other staffs of nursing facilities, and push away ineligible people," Teramachi adds.

Even when violations are reported to the authorities, as was the case with Chibikko Boy, Teramachi believes that little action is taken to intervene—with occasionally deadly consequences. "Administration has that authority but does not exercise it," she says. "The reason they don't is that if they interrupt the facilities' [operation], many children would have no other facility to go to, and the administration doesn't want to create such situation."

Finding a solution clearly isn't straightforward, with Japan's strict gender roles posing further complications. Abe's government has pushed for more women to enter the workforce, but women are still assumed to be responsible for the care of children, putting immense pressure on working moms.

The mother of a 17-month-old boy from the central Tokyo told Broadly she uses an unlicensed daycare five days a week. She wants to remain anonymous for professional reasons. "I wanted to let my child go to the local nursery, but public childcare centres have such poor capacity," she says, "and as a freelancer I cannot be prioritized."

She adds: "In Japan it is so hard to change jobs, for both men and women, and especially for mothers. The employment culture in Japan has been so rigid that once people are employed on a permanent basis, stability and pay is guaranteed in the long term, but once you change job, it is difficult to find the same level of employment. If women quit their job once for their children, companies don't recognize them as being capable of becoming permanent staff when mothers re-apply for permanent positions."

Thanks to women who have begun to speak out about their experiences, childcare has increasingly become a national public issue. In an impassioned Facebook post on 22 October in response to the two deaths at baby hotels in March, Tamura Tomoko—a member of the House of Councillors, the upper house of the Japanese parliament—said, "let's continue to investigate and continue to assess the safety in unauthorized baby hotels, and keep the subject on the current political agenda for further investigations in the future."

It's evident that far deeper and more drastic change is needed in Japan to put an end to the culture of baby hotels. Too many parents have already had to endure the worst pain imaginable.

-reprinted from Broadly

Region: Asia ^[3]

Tags: unregulated child care ^[4]

childcare-industry

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/asia> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/unregulated-child-care>