Families in Japan worry about lingering daycare shortage [1]

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Source: Kyodo via Today Online
Format: Article
Publication Date: 17 Aug 2017

AVAILABILITY
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EXCERPTS

OITA (Japan) — It's not all happiness for one mother expecting her second child – she is unsure if she can find daycare for her coming baby.

"I'm worried about whether I'll be able to find a slot by the time I return to work," said the 34-year-old office worker, as she played with her six-year-old son in a park in the south-western Japanese city of Oita.

There were 463 children on the waiting list for daycare in Oita as of spring last year. Across Japan, the figure was 23,700 as of April – and will not get better as the government finds itself grappling with increased demand for childcare with the rising number of working mothers, ironically because of the government's new growth-promoting strategies.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had previously pledged to slash the number of children on daycare waiting lists to zero by the end of next March in an effort to get more women into the workforce.

But in May, he postponed the target date by three years to the end of March 2021, saying that an increase in working mothers had resulted in more demand for childcare.

Critics and some lawmakers from the ruling camp are sceptical he can slash childcare wait lists to zero, even with the three-year extension.

One key reason is that the demand for daycare is highest in more populated areas. In Oita, for instance, a city government official attributed the local daycare shortage to an influx of population in urban centres.

"People are coming in from other municipalities in Oita Prefecture and the population has been concentrated in one area," said the official, referring to the many apartment blocks sprouting up around Japan Rail Oita Station. "Demand for daycare is rising."

The Oita city government plans to add slots for 941 children this fiscal year, more than double the previous year. He said that Oita needs to enhance childcare services so as to maintain its population, even though doing so may involve a huge financial burden.

"The state government has postponed the target (of reducing children on daycare waiting lists to zero) to the end of fiscal 2020, but our city aims to attain the target next April," said Oita Mayor Kiichiro Sato.

Oita's case is not unique. The problem of population concentration is shared by many other prefectural capitals in the country.

Government efforts to tackle the daycare shortage first began in 2001, after then-prime minister Junichiro Koizumi pledged to tackle the issue during his inaugural policy address in Parliament. "Raising the issue during his first parliamentary speech reflected Mr Koizumi's political savvy," said Ms Mariko Bando, chancellor of Showa Women's University.

Ms Bando, who at that time was director of the Cabinet Office's Gender Equality Bureau, said that back then, many Japanese believed mothers should stay at home until their children turn three.

"Daycare was thus considered a necessary evil," she said.

Several years after Mr Koizumi raised the issue, Japan's daycare capacity increased by 25,000 to 30,000 annually. The number of children on the waiting list fell from 25,000 in fiscal 2002 to 18,000 in five years.

In fiscal 2007, however, the growth of capacity began to slow down and the waiting list got longer again.

Ms Bando said this is due to a new tide of conservatism in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, which advocated women staying at home.

The trend was prominent after Mr Abe replaced Mr Koizumi in 2006 in his first term as prime minister, she said.

When Mr Abe returned to power for a second term as premier in 2012, he changed his stance and began to advocate adding more female workers to the labour force as a pillar of his growth strategy.

A major obstacle is that training has not kept up with increased building of daycare centres. This is the reason daycare capacity has not

increased.

“We have to know that it takes time to develop human resources,” said Professor Masako Maeda of Konan University, who had served as deputy mayor from 2003 to 2007 in Yokohama, a city known for its ambitious efforts to overhaul its childcare system.

Prof Maeda said building daycare centres at a rapid pace has caused a vicious cycle. A lack of staff leads to workers working overtime, and quitting due to exhaustion, with the tough working conditions putting off potential new recruits.

“When we built the centres, we should have trained a sufficient number of workers too,” she said.

The slow improvement has generated frustration and outrage among working mothers.

In February 2016, an anonymous blog titled I couldn’t get daycare – die Japan! went viral.

It prompted a protest against the daycare shortage among working parents in front of the Diet building in Tokyo.

One Liberal Democratic Party lawmaker who served in a ministerial post said: “It used to be only natural that a mother quits her job to deliver her baby, and would never get so furious about daycare.”

Prof Maeda said the government needs to take the lead to improve recognition for daycare workers. “Substantial amounts of tax money must be injected to raise the wages for daycare workers. Taxpayers should also be braced for a burden.”

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