

'Pregnancy order' rule among nursery workers stirs controversy

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EXCERPTS

Some Japanese nurseries and other workplaces staffed mainly by women have an in-house policy that some think borders on the absurd: women must wait their turn to become pregnant to avoid staffing shortages resulting from multiple workers taking maternity or childcare leave at the same time.

The issue has been addressed on television shows and stirred online debates about human rights after a reader's letter was posted in the Mainichi Shimbun daily newspaper in February, explaining that the head of a private childcare facility in Aichi Prefecture, central Japan, decides "pregnancy order" among its workers.

The writer of the letter said he and his wife, who works at the childcare facility, felt obliged to apologize to the facility director for her conceiving out of turn.

A labor union said last year there was an objection raised from a staff member at a public nursery school in northeastern Japan. "The staff here have to discuss amongst themselves and decide on the order to conceive babies. Isn't this strange?"

But amid the serious daycare shortages facing the nation, others argue the rotation scheme is a necessary evil.

"One of the causes of the arrangement was the inability to get substitute staff" to make up for workers on maternity leave, said a member of the union.

The employees, the member said, decided on their own to introduce the rotation system out of concern that taking maternity or childcare leave at the same time might disrupt the daycare's operations.

"The system violates the right to self-determination as to when to conceive and presents a legal problem," said Yumiko Akutsu, a lawyer who provides legal consultations to those having trouble coping with such pregnancy rotation systems. "It is also an infringement of the rights of the women's partners," she said.

The issue has attracted a flood of comments on the internet, with some saying that whether and when a woman decides to have a child is a personal matter based on her life plan and people at her workplace should butt out.

Others argue the practice constitutes "maternity harassment," and that a woman cannot always get pregnant at any time, despite plans, casting doubt on the feasibility of the system.

But there are also people supportive of such rotation systems. They argue that if several workers at daycare centers, where most of the employees are women, take maternity leave at once, it could cause trouble to both the centers and other colleagues.

They also say children who have become accustomed to a teacher may be bothered by them being replaced by other staff.

The issue highlights a serious shortage of childcare professionals in Japan, stemming from long working hours and low wages.

Daycare workers are also said to feel strong pressure to provide a safe environment for children, and relationships among colleagues and with parents often become complicated.

The government, which hopes to promote women's work to make up for labor shortages, has set a goal to reduce the number of children on nursery waiting lists across Japan to zero by the end of 2020.

To that end the government envisions increasing the slots for children to be accepted by 320,000 by that time. This will require 77,000 more childcare workers.

But the current staff shortages have hampered the project. They have forced some nurseries to postpone opening and others to reduce the number of children to be accepted.

To help staff continue working and encourage workers who have quit to return to their jobs, the government raised daycare workers' salaries by 2 percent and introduced a pay-raise system in April last year.

Nursery workers' monthly salaries, however, average 222,900 yen (\$2,000), compared with 304,300 yen for all industries.

While expressing an understanding of the staffing shortage concerns facing nurseries, Naoki Ogi, a critic of educational issues who has written about pregnancy rotations in his blog, said, "I still feel something is wrong with introducing such a rotation system."

"It is not an issue that can be resolved by individual facilities, but is an issue that should be taken care of by society as a whole," he said. "In an inhuman labor environment, humane education cannot be provided."

Postings on the internet and reports to labor unions reveal that pregnancy rotation is not only an issue in the childcare industry but also takes place with hospital nurses and doctors -- all professions which require licenses and certain skills that make securing staff even more difficult.

Akutsu, the lawyer mentioned above, explained that Japan's Labor Standards Act stipulates that expectant women and nursing mothers deserve special care and that their employers have a responsibility to manage the operation while they take maternity or childcare leave.

"We should take the rotation system as a warning from the ailing workplace and should work out measures to tackle the problem," she said.

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