

COVID worsens Japan's persistent gender gap in child care ^[1]

Day care closures hit working moms disproportionately, deepening labor shortage

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EXCERPTS

TOKYO -- Waves of day care closures caused by the coronavirus outbreak have disproportionately affected working mothers, especially those in their 30s. The pandemic has made Japan's gender gap in child care, already much wider than those in the U.S. and Europe, worse by forcing more women to stay home to take care of their children. Many experts worry that unless this gap is corrected, labor participation by women will stall, worsening the country's labor shortage.

"I can't work because I'm so busy taking care of my kid," said a woman in Kawasaki, near Tokyo. She began to work from home after the nursery school her 5-year-old attends was closed due to the pandemic in February. She said she must work overtime after putting her child to bed, and her husband is no use. "The only help I get is from video games and YouTube," she said.

Location data on mobile phone users shows a marked decline in women's presence in Tokyo's business districts after a quasi-state of emergency took effect in the city on Jan. 21. According to data from Docomo Insight Marketing, the daytime traffic of men and women in their 30s and 50s in the city's major business centers moved almost in unison from late last year through early this year. But after the emergency measures were imposed, the number of women fell more than that of men -- 2 points more for those in their 30s. Among women, those in their 30s fell more than those in their 50s.

The diminished presence of women in business districts corresponded with an increase in the number of closures of day care centers. The number of nurseries that had closed due to the pandemic nationwide rose from seven on Jan. 6 to 777 on Feb. 3, according to the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare. Shutdowns of elementary schools and their classes also surged in the same period.

In Japan, there is a wide gender gap in homemaking and child rearing. Women spend five time more hours on unpaid home chores than men in Japan, compared to about double in the U.S. and Europe, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Although the public has become more aware of the need for men to share child rearing, the number of men who actually take child care leave is not growing.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected female workers more than their male counterparts since the first state of emergency was declared in April 2020. Average daily work hours in the 21 months through December fell 2% for men and 2.5% for women from the same period two years earlier. Overtime work hours fell 14.3% for women during the same period, 4 points more than for men. The number of workdays also fell more for women.

"The current situation may reinforce the popular notion that women work only for a short period, although many are compelled to work a fewer hours than they desire," said Daiji Kawaguchi, a professor of economics at the University of Tokyo. The slower pace of promotion at the workplace could also discourage women to work, said another observer.

Japan's working population is expected to fall by more than 10 million by 2040 if its labor participation rate remains at the current level. Women's entry into the labor force is indispensable to arrest the decline. The ratio of working women in the 15- to 64-year-old segment rose 13 points between 2000 and 2021, to 73%. If the ratios of women and the elderly in the labor force increase by 10 points each, the drop in the working population can be held to 3.6 million, according to a Nikkei estimate.

To ease women's burden at home, Japan needs more services to support double-income couples, as well as government efforts to encourage men to share household work and child care. France and other European countries offer tax breaks to both the users and providers of services for homemaking and child care.

"The Japanese government offers child care incentives to eligible families, but not many parents take advantage of them," said Naoko Kuga, an analyst at the NLI Research Institute. "More efforts need to be made to spread such programs."

Region: Asia ^[3]

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