

Germany struggles to close daycare gap [DE] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The childcare crisis in Germany has reached epic proportions. Politicians are trying to plug the holes, but parents and experts remain skeptical.

"When it comes to childcare, compared to the rest of the European Union, Germany is a third world country." Harsh words, considering that they come from Renate Schmidt, Germany's Federal Minister for the Family.

For families with two working parents or single parent households, Schmidt's comment rings especially true. The childcare crisis in Germany has reached epic proportions, particularly for parents with children under the age of three. Many struggle to find a spot at one of the country's many so-called "Kitas," daycare centers for young children.

The latest numbers speak for themselves: in eastern Germany, 36 percent of children under the age of three have a daycare spot, while in the west, the percentage drops to a meager 2.7 percent. The situation in the eastern states is better due to the communist legacy -- in the former East Germany, women were encouraged to work, and the regime fostered a collective attitude towards daycare.

Regional differences aside, parents across Germany often wait months for a spot to become available or are forced to seek out other private -- and more expensive -- alternatives.

At the same time, Germany is suffering from a demographic crisis that threatens to cripple the social welfare system. Declining birth rates mean that not enough young people will pay into the system to finance the benefits of the retiring generation. One of the causes for the crisis: Germans say the lack of childcare offerings have put them off having more than one child, if any at all.

Last week, Minister Schmidt and the federal cabinet took steps to improve the situation and passed a bill allocating 1.5 billion to create more than 200,000 additional full-day child care spots for young children by 2010. For interested parties on both ends of the family values spectrum -- from conservatives to feminists -- the bill falls short. Some parents are likewise skeptical, though they are still hoping for a light at the end of the tunnel.

On an early morning in Berlin's Mitte district, Kai Gneuss, the married father of a three-year-old, drops his child off at the "Kita" on Habersaathstrasse. This is not an unusual event: Gneuss's son spends an average of seven hours a day in care because both his parents work -- Gneuss as a salesman and his wife as a nurse.

According to Gneuss, both he and his wife need to work, so they started to look for childcare early on. But the search proved frustrating, even in Berlin, where the chances of finding a spot are greater. In the end, they searched for more than six months.

The experience made quite an impression on Gneuss and has influenced his feelings about having a second child. "We would very much like to have another," he told DW-WORLD. "But then we start to think, will we find daycare and will it be affordable?" The Gneuss family will remain a trio.

Will the new bill make inroads towards changing Gneuss's attitude and that of other parents like him? Gneuss is not so sure. "What they are proposing is a minimal solution and doesn't come close to covering a normal working day, which is usually eight or nine hours when you take into account travel times to and from work," he says. "Full daycare" that closes promptly at five -- as many centers will since the law doesn't create a nationwide standard of opening hours as is the case countries such as France -- won't help, he says.

The importance of childcare remains the subject of much debate in Germany, where the government is struggling to reconcile the competing visions of two once separate states. In the east under communism, a collective attitude was fostered, with the government investing heavily in care and encouraging women to work outside the home. In the west, however, family politics took a different path. On the whole, politicians in the west tended to view care outside of the home by third parties with suspicion, instead opting for policies that encouraged women -- for the first few years at least -- to stay home, Uta Meier, a professor for Family Studies at the University of Giessen, told DW-WORLD.

The western way of thinking has had a considerable impact. German women are far less likely than their contemporaries in other European countries to work outside the home. In Germany, only 62 percent of women with children work (and many of those in part-time

positions), compared to 80 percent in France. And an increasing number of women who have invested heavily in their education-- 41 percent -- opt not to have any children. According to Meier, there is every indication that this trend will continue.

Meier says that what Germany needs is a law guaranteeing parents the right to daycare for children of all ages, regardless of socio-economic background. And she would like to see the debate move beyond the daycare issue alone, and begin focusing on ways to end discrimination against women re-entering the work force after taking time-out to raise a family.

- reprinted from Deutsche-Welle

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