

Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe urges women to return to work amid child care crisis ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

At a local council in central Tokyo, mothers have gathered to demand childcare. There is a child care crisis in Japan where 400,000 places are needed.

In protest, the mothers present a petition to local councillors at Suginami declaring: "Our children are on a waiting list for day care places which are in chronic short supply. Without them we can't work."

Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe wants to shore up Japan's status as the world's third biggest economy by placing more women in the workforce, but they cannot get child care.

And when they do have a job, women have to battle Japan's male corporate culture.

Tomomi Tashiro, who was working as a retail manager when she fell pregnant, quit her job when her male bosses would not give her maternity leave.

She is not alone, in a country where 70 per cent of Japanese women stop working permanently after having their first child.

"There is a perspective in society that it's natural for women to look after children at home. They think leaving children in a day care centre is not right, so society doesn't support us," Ms Tashiro said.

Her friend Mikiko Marikawa was granted maternity leave for 18 months but believes she will not keep her job as a sales executive when she returns to the IT company that employs her.

"I may have to take off suddenly when my daughter is ill. I'll have to work long hours again so I'm not sure I can do the job," she said.

"My male colleagues don't understand about being a mother and having a career."

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Japanese women are the most highly educated in the world but they are also among the most under-utilised with only about a third in the workforce.

Japan's population is ageing fast and it is estimated by 2050 the country will lose 40 per cent of its workforce, and its status as an economic superpower, if women do not fill the gap.

Masako Mori, one of only two female ministers in parliament, is in charge of women's empowerment. She says she is aware of the enormity of the challenge.

"Active participation by women is listed as our top economic growth strategy," she said.

"Business now realises if they mishandle this they will [be] digging their own graves."

The minister says the government will reduce child care waiting lists to zero within three years and is setting a target for women to fill 30 per cent of all leadership positions in business and government by 2020.

"We're making policies to break down the system, giving increased financial incentives for males to take child care leave, tax incentives for women to keep working and we are educating male managers," she said.

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But it is lonely for females at the top in Japan, where only 1 per cent of senior executives are women.

Junko Okawa, a former flight attendant who has just been appointed as a board member to Japan Airlines (JAL), says it is "rare for a woman to take a senior leadership position".

"There is no system in place to support working mothers and also women really believe they can't reach that level," she said.

Ms Okawa says it has been easier at JAL to reach the top because the company has an unusually generous system of child care and

maternity leave and a unique culture courtesy of mainly female employees.

"I wanted to become a leader in the cabin and then the department ... even after I had a child I was still aiming at my goal," she said.

"I had good support from my parents, which is important."

After Lateline spoke with Ms Tashiro, she found a job as a clerk but with longer hours and less pay than her last job. Her mother-in-law will look after her son.

Ms Tashiro says she cannot see how the government can achieve its targets to bring women into the workplace.

"The politicians who run our country are older men. They think mothers should look after their children at home and they're making policy," she said.

Ms Tashiro's friend Ms Marikawa says if she chooses to go back to work she will be forced to put her daughter into unauthorised child care, where conditions are cramped and carers are in short supply.

"I think only a small number of women can pursue leadership positions," she said.

"I think in our society you have to choose whether you want to have a career or be a mother; you can't do both."

Ms Marikawa and Ms Tashiro, along with many others, believe Japanese culture has to change first before women can be considered equals in the workforce. And they say that will take at least a generation.

- reprinted from Seven News

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