

Angry Japan parents demand more daycare as PM struggles to respond ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Mika Kiyokawa would love to have a third child but has abandoned the idea - because finding daycare for the two boys she already has was so much trouble she doesn't want to go through it again.

The 34-year-old Japanese office worker is one of the women Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has pledged to mobilise in the workforce through his "Womenomics" policy to boost the economy, but a severe shortage of daycare is hampering the drive - and igniting criticism of Abe just months before an election.

The daycare shortage is also frustrating efforts to boost Japan's rock-bottom birthrate, another plank of Abe's platform.

The long-festering issue burst into public consciousness last month after an anonymous blog post by a woman went viral, setting off protests and petition drives calling for change.

"My child didn't get into daycare," she wrote. "Die, Japan!"

Abe initially dismissed the blog, but public anger and media coverage prompted him to promise to address the problem with greater urgency ahead of a July upper house election.

Kiyokawa visited 24 daycare centres before landing a place for her first child more than 30 minutes from home.

"I want another child but finding daycare was so tough that I won't," Kiyokawa said at a meeting between lawmakers and desperate parents demanding more daycare, many with wriggling babes in arms.

"And with women having so much trouble with childcare, a company choosing between a woman and a man will of course hire a man from the start, perpetuating inequality."

Opposition from neighbours fearing noise makes building new centres difficult, while salaries languish, making it hard to attract enough staff. Daycare workers in Tokyo averaged 2.12 million yen (\$18,884) in 2013, government data shows.

Abe's Liberal Democratic Party has made "a new support system for children and childraising" part of its campaign platform while the opposition Democratic Party has proposed a bill to raise daycare worker salaries.

But only 19 lawmakers attended Wednesday's meeting, none from the LDP.

"We're not asking for anything splendid, we just want to live our lives," said Asato Hayashi, 37, her six-month-old daughter Chizuru in her arms.

"If you can't work, you can't live. But without daycare you can't work - and you won't want to have kids."

(\$1 = 112.2600 yen)

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