Day care crisis stuck in vicious cycle [1]

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EXCERPTS

The employee was in the throes of desperation as her maternity leave drew to a close in mid-March.

The Shibuya Ward, Tokyo, resident had just two weeks left before returning to work, but after applying to enroll in one day care center after another, she still hadn't nailed any. An impossible choice then loomed: either quit her job or shell out for a private international day care center that costs a whopping ¥240,000 a month.

Luckily, a vacancy popped up at the last minute at a day care center in neighboring Shinjuku Ward, and she leaped at the opportunity.

Today, the woman, who only wanted to be identified by her last name — Nakagawa — travels to the out-of-town facility every morning while protecting her 1-year-old son in a stroller from passengers on a packed Tokyo train and threading her way through the throngs of commuters in Shinjuku Station.

"I'm traumatized by the whole day care-hunting experience," she said.

"It kind of makes you wonder whether you should have a second baby. Japan is supposed to be trying to improve its low birthrate, but this day care shortage thing does nothing to help that," the mother in her 30s said.

Nakagawa's plight mirrors that of many other working women who, after failing to place their child in day care, grow pessimistic about having a second child or simply end their careers — a situation that runs counter to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's pledge to draw more women into the workforce.

Although the day care shortage is a problem dating back to early 1990s, public outrage recently flared anew after a 30-something Tokyo mother expounded on the matter in a blog post that went viral.

With public interest surging, the Abe administration last month scrambled to compile emergency measures to mitigate the day care shortage. But child-rearing experts say the steps are overly focused on further deregulating the child care industry at the risk of safety.

More fundamentally, the measures fail to address what many call the root of the problem: abysmally low wages that often make nursery teachers quit for good, preventing new facilities from being opened.

Despite Japan's shrinking population, the number of children on waiting lists has shown no sign of thinning over the years, due mostly to the rise in working parents caused by decades of economic malaise. As of the end of April 2015, 23,167 children couldn't get into day care, up about 1,800 from a year earlier.

Points system

In Japan, the activity of hunting for day care, dubbed hokatsu, involves a notorious point system in which parents seeking certified facilities are prioritized by criteria including their work and marital status, health and income.

The more desperately they are considered to be in need, the more points they get.

Tomoko, a 35-year-old Meguro Ward resident who asked to be identified only by her first name, said her 1-year-old son didn't get a slot in any of the five certified day care centers she applied to a year ago, forcing her to extend child-care leave twice.

What surprised her was the nonchalant way a ward official told her she needed to give up on certified day care — which is usually considered better and more affordable — on her first try and use a noncertified facility for a year to earn enough points to reapply.

"They told me spending a year at noncertified day care would earn me 42 points, without which I apparently couldn't even compete with other moms," she said. "But isn't it crazy the ward takes it for granted that our children first need to enroll in day care that doesn't meet normal standards?"

The points system is also "horrible" for its apparent lack of logic, said Shinjuku resident Anat Parnass, who had to quit her part-time

teaching job at a vocational high school in April after her offspring was denied entry to more than 10 day care centers in the ward.

Despite being a single mother with an 8-month-old daughter, Parnass, also a professional photographer, didn't have enough points to land a spot in day care because she only works part-time. Shinjuku Ward didn't take into account her occupation as a photographer due to a lack of stable income, she said.

"Why is it so difficult to be a mother here?" the Israeli asked. Parnass, 41, said she is now jobless and has no idea how she will make a living.

'All about deregulation'

It's not that the government has done nothing to counter the situation.

In 2013, it unveiled a five-year plan to boost capacity in day care and other child-rearing facilities by generating an additional 400,000 slots by the end of fiscal 2019. It even revised the goal to 500,000 in a budget proposal approved for this fiscal year, pledging ¥119.1 billion to this end.

Still, critics say the emergency measures unveiled by Abe suggest it is making the same mistake its predecessors made over the years.

"It's all about deregulation," said Aki Fukoin, head of the civic group Parents Concerned with Nursery Schools who has closely followed the issue for about 20 years.

Among the government's latest proposals is a call for municipalities that uphold higher requirements for staff-child ratios than advised by the state to lower those standards and "accommodate as many children as possible."

In addition, they suggest the quota for "small scale" day care centers that cater exclusively to infants up to 2 years old be raised to 22 per facility from 19.

Although outside of the emergency measures, a new edict by the welfare ministry also took effect this month that allows unqualified day care staff to work alongside professional nursery teachers for a certain amount of time each day, provided they have similar experience beforehand.

These efforts, however, sound all too familiar. Japan has already encouraged day care centers to accept more children than they have room for and allowed new facilities to be opened without playgrounds as long as there are parks in the vicinity.

"Japan's day care centers have undergone enough deregulation already. Lowering the standards further may affect the welfare and safety of children," Fukoin said, asserting that none of these "cosmetic" efforts are even remotely close to fundamental reform.

Few dread the consequences of compromising child-care quality in the name of deregulation more than 37-year-old Kazumi Abe, whose 1-year-old daughter, Mizuki, died a tragic death at the hands of a local day care center in the city of Saitama in February 2011.

A subsequent hearing of nursery staff at the center revealed Mizuki died after a teacher laid her face-down and placed a futon atop the back of her head to stop her from crying during a nap time.

It wasn't until a few hours later Mizuki was found dead, with rigor mortis already setting in. None of the staff had bothered to check on her in between. The day care center in question didn't meet state standards but was certified by the city under its own criteria.

Abe blames her daughter's death on the facility's sloppy child-care system and said the government should be concentrating on improving quality.

"It seems to me that the government is only concerned about reducing the sheer numbers on waiting lists. But it needs to understand that each number represents a human life — a life it needs to protect and help grow," Abe said.

A thankless job

What is truly needed, then, is a root-and-branch overhaul of working conditions and nursery salaries, experts say.

Nursery teachers earn a monthly average of ¥219,000, more than ¥100,000 lower than the all-industry average of ¥333,000, a 2015 welfare ministry survey shows. This, coupled with the physically and emotionally taxing nature of the job, is said to translate into high turnover, with the number of so-called latent nursery teachers — who are qualified but refuse to return — estimated at about 800,000 in 2014, according to the welfare ministry.

To lure these people back into the industry, the government budgeted ¥17.7 billion for fiscal 2016 to bring about a measly 1.9 percent increase in salary — an additional ¥6,000 a month.

The opposition parties jointly submitted a bill to the Lower House last month seeking to raise their monthly salaries by ¥50,000.

Subpar wage standards hardly do justice to the grueling, highly technical nature of the work, said Hiromi Machida, who worked as a Tokyo nursery teacher for about 30 years.

"Many people look down on our profession, saying all we do is just play with kids," she said. "Think about it. If you're put in charge of a class of toddlers, that's basically 30 little lives you need to take responsibility for all by yourself. That's enormous stress," she said.

Back-breaking physical labor also pervades her daily routine, as she constantly rocks toddlers in her arms and forces herself into a crouching position because everything around her is child-sized. Not to mention, Machida said, teachers need to be knowledgeable about everything from children's anatomy to their language acquisition process. Adding to this are reams of paperwork they often need to bring

home that aren't covered by wages.

"Improving treatment of nursery teachers is essential to solving the day care center shortage. Without enough staff, you can't open any," Machida said.

"The government needs a drastic change in policy. It's time it began to invest in actual humans," she said.

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