

Death in day care: Japan's parents face nursery lottery^[1]

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EXCERPTS

When Yuki Kai dropped her baby son off at nursery on her way to work he was his usual bright, exuberant self. Just hours later the 14-month-old was dead.

Kai remains tortured by the questions surrounding her toddler Kento's final hours and her decision to leave him at an unofficial facility.

"Kento was found dead when a staff member went into the room to wake him from a nap. He was in a room separate from where the other infants were sleeping because he had cried," she told AFP.

The case caused national outrage and fears Japan's working parents face a childcare lottery: Legal expert Toko Teramachi warned accidents are "30 times more frequent" for children at non-official centres.

But the entire system is under-funded and government approved nurseries are over-subscribed, leaving many parents to rely on other options, where rules dictating class size, staff training and space are less strict.

In 2015, 14 children died in childcare facilities nationwide -- 65 percent of these incidents happened in unofficial nurseries.

Experts warn Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's bid to tackle the nation's day care shortage by loosening requirements -- such as those limiting class sizes -- for even official nurseries, will simply make more facilities dangerous.

Child welfare specialist Hiroko Inokuma said deregulation plans were "a reckless move...which could lead to more accidents" with too many children crammed into nurseries.

"You can't put your child's life in someone's hands if quality is not guaranteed," warned Renho, a leading member of the opposition Democratic Party, who goes by one name.

'I had no choice'

Abe has come under fire for his call for the nation's women to both bear more children to stem a falling population, and to keep working to boost the struggling economy, without providing proper childcare facilities to support this dual demand.

The labour ministry estimated at least 23,000 children were unable to find an official daycare place last year.

"I couldn't get a slot in a certified facility...I had no choice at all," Kai told AFP from her home in Ichikawa, her living room decorated with Kento's photos, toys and a Buddhist memorial altar.

Her baby was left unattended for 50 minutes when he was found face down in the bed. Government regulations dictate children need to be placed to sleep on their backs -- to reduce the risk of SIDS -- and checked every 10 minutes.

An autopsy proved inconclusive but she is considering legal action. The local government has launched an inquiry into the case and conducted on-site inspections. Lawyers for the school did not respond to AFP requests for comment made through the facility.

Kai is furious that instead of increasing spending in childcare provision, Abe is opting for a cheap fix.

"It's unbelievable that deregulation is taking place despite the frequency of fatal accidents," she said.

In July, the supreme court upheld an earlier ruling that a one-year-old girl died from suffocation after sleeping face down at an unapproved nursery in Fukushima. It said staff were insufficiently trained and ordering it to pay 57 million yen (\$570,000) in compensation to her parents.

"Maintaining quality daycare should be guaranteed for children to protect their lives," insisted Inokuma, a professor at Tokyo City University.

'Japan Die!'

Poor provision of childcare is an issue that has festered for decades. But Abe's government, overwhelmed with public debt and a demographic time bomb, is facing renewed scrutiny because of their dual push to raise fertility rates and to propel more women into the workforce.

Japan's population of 127 million is set to decline to 87 million by 2060.

With the option of large-scale immigration off the table in culturally conservative Japan, Abe hopes to raise the fertility rate -- the number of children a woman bears over a lifetime -- from about 1.4 currently to 1.8, which would slow the decline but not reverse it.

Since coming to power in 2012, he has also touted female-focused "womenomics" policies as part of his broader "Abenomics" economic revitalisation plan, but with little success.

Officials have slashed their goal of increasing women in government leadership positions by 2021 from 30 percent to seven percent.

Some are finding it hard to hide their frustration at the two-pronged demands in the face of little state back-up.

Earlier this year, an anonymous mother vented her anger online.

"I couldn't get day care, Japan die!!! I give birth and raise a child while working to pay taxes," she wrote. "So Japan, what's your problem?"

The post became a social media phenomenon and helped power a petition demanding increased spending on childcare. It garnered 28,000 signatures and prompted government promises of better pay for nursery staff.

But many parents feel they are in an impossible position. One mother, who works in public relations and asked not to be named, told AFP she was struggling to find a day care solution.

She added: "I feel I am up against the wall on all sides... I simply cannot understand why Japan has not been investing more in younger generations that will eventually support all of society."

-reprinted from Daily Mail

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