

Child Care in Japan : The Changing Political Context

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Child Care in Japan: The Changing Political Context

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Child care has steadily become a commanding political issue in Japan. The government reversed policy in the early 1990s, moving from neglect of the child care system to seeking to expand and improve it, mainly in the hope that improving women's economic opportunities would bring about an increase in the birthrate. Despite considerable expansion, however, waiting lists for slots in licensed centers, which are much cheaper and better than unlicensed centers, have remained conspicuous. Japan's conservative governments have at times tried to use child care service waiting lists as policymaking benchmarks, but this approach has backfired politically, as the lists have instead become flashpoints for criticizing government policy. In early 2016, the issue flared dramatically because of a near-perfect storm of rising expectations, severe underfunding, growing financial (and other) stress on families, and a chance blog by a frustrated mother that triggered a new round of policymaking promises.

This report suggests that Japan's child care problem is multilayered. First and most obviously, construction of new facilities is well behind demand, leading to angry outbursts from frustrated parents along with some opportunistic posturing by opposition parties. However, professional observers are primarily concerned that quality of care is suffering because the current policy course emphasizes deregulation to hold down costs and encourage private sector participation in child care. As a result, most childcare workers suffer poor treatment, leading to a vicious cycle of overworked staff, a growing number of under- or untrained staff, and high quit rates, including the loss of many of the veteran caregivers needed to make care services safe and reliable. This is largely a controversy about money, since the central government has continued to hold down spending on child care even as it attempts to bolster the sector. Japan's child care services have always been well-respected, despite rather marginal funding, but some recent sources give reason to believe that continued under-spending, especially combined with rapid expansion, could

entail severe social as well as economic costs.

Part 1 Background

With pressure on women to work growing, and opportunity to pursue professional opportunities improving as well, there is rising demand for child care support. There are also worsening social pressures that call for better child care support, including rising child poverty. Meanwhile, weakening family and community support mean that many parents have trouble learning how to do proper child care. Researchers and specialists point to rising levels of children needing special care, and of families, such as single-parent families, needing greater assistance (e.g., Kawamura 2015:89-92). Many of the country's most vulnerable employees are in dire need of good child care support. The number of single mother-led families is increasing rapidly, and most are mired in poverty. The Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW) calculates the average income of a single mother-led family is at just 44 percent of the national average even though most single mothers work (*Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 2016.01.12 online). In addition, it is expected that in a few years some 14 percent of mothers will be pressed into so-called double-care, or caring for both young children and infirm older relatives, up from recent levels of around eight percent (*Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 2016.01.04, evening edition, page 14). Finally, the above factors, along with the financial or emotional stress felt by some families, have allegedly triggered a steep rise in child abuse, especially if a large number of alleged improperly classified deaths are factored in (*Japan Times* 2016.04.08). Well qualified child care workers are of course a vital first line of defense in alleviating such problems.

Japan is experiencing a severe shortage of child care facilities, but this is predominantly a big-city problem. In April 2015, for example, 23,167 children were on the national wait list, with 7814, or 34 percent, of them in Tokyo. Osaka, Saitama Prefecture, and Yokohama are other areas with large waiting lists of children. In regional cities, in contrast, many centers have been shutting down or consolidating as populations have begun shrinking.

The heightened importance placed on women's work and the pledges of the current Abe Shinzo Government have triggered a "construction rush" to build new centers, and it has brought attention to another longstanding problem, namely a worsening shortage of childcare workers. Demand for childcare workers reached 5.72 positions per available

worker in Tokyo in November 2015. The worker shortage results mainly from long-recognized weaknesses in the nation's employment system, especially the long work hours common to Japanese workplaces, and the difficulty that many or most women experience in getting maternity leave. As we shall see, these conditions drive many qualified and/or veteran childcare workers out of the industry, but it is primarily a systemic problem. First, long work hours mean that hundreds of thousands of working parents need extended child care services (*encho hoiku*), greatly raising the costs of care. Second, many women experience difficulty in getting childcare leave - differently stated, strong pressure to return quickly to their jobs, generally on a full-time basis. This results in heavy demand for care for infants, who require many more staff than older pre-school children, again at disproportionately high cost. A survey by the MHLW (cited in Kobayashi 2015:20) indicates that 85 percent of children on waiting lists are 0 to 3 years old, largely because those are the ages that require the most care personnel.

Long hours and crowded cities mean that a premium is placed on placing centers in accessible areas, especially near train stations to minimize parental travel time. But it is in any case difficult to get land in big cities, and residents (especially older persons) often resist efforts to build new centers because of the noise and inconvenience. Partly for these reasons, governments have been pushing policies to ease rules and standards, notably those governing staffing, minimum space, and play areas. Tokyo pioneered the use of flexible standards allowing centers to be "semi-certified" (*ninsho*, essentially midway between licensed and unlicensed) even if they had no outdoor play area, as long as a park was nearby (furthermore, the definition of "near" may be flexible).

While Japan years ago joined many European nations in seeking to use child care services as part of a sort of family supply infrastructure to revive national birthrates, a distinctive feature of Japanese practice is strong emphasis on use of market forces to try to achieve robust results at low cost. This has entailed extensive deregulation, especially with regard to requirements for space and staffing. Since shortages are most severe in major cities, where land in easily accessible areas is difficult to procure, there is strong incentive to ease rules on space (minimum standards for space per child along with outdoor play areas); such easing can make it far cheaper and easier for operators to open new facilities. Staffing is generally by far the most expensive cost component, often seventy percent of the total. The financial incentives are very clear for governments suffering implacable financial difficulties (meaning the central government along with virtually every "local government" (*jichitai*) in Japan). In Fuchi City in Tokyo, for example, private

operators can, incredibly, provide operate a facility serving around one hundred children for about half what the local government would pay out, or anyway so the competitive bids would seem to indicate (Kobayashi 2015:102). As a result, there has been a sharp rise in the ratio of private sector operators over the past two decades. Moreover, new government policies have steadily made it easier for operators to achieve the much-desired status of licensed provider. In some cases, local governments press operators to become licensed, mainly so that waiting lists can be reduced (only children waiting for entrance into licensed centers count).

However, the non-financial costs have been high, and have only recently come to be widely recognized (although knowledgeable observers of the child care industry and various activists have pointed out, and often resisted, these trends for years). The core problem of private sector operators is that they seek to earn profits, creating some undesirable incentives. They often appeal to parents by using dubious marketing devices, sometimes emphasizing less important benefits of their facilities such as English teaching, often while neglecting more important factors such as competence of staff in child care itself. The more dangerous problems include neglect of basic standards and poor treatment of staff. Private operators such as JP Holdings have expanded rapidly as the government's incentives have improved in the past decade, but they have been suspected of systematic neglect of basic quality and safety measures. Especially damaging is constant loss (or under-use) of experienced veteran staff. Furthermore, with cost-cutting rampant, according to critics, these problems are increasingly evident in the public sector as well, if less damagingly.

Researchers have established that Japan produces plenty of qualified childcare workers in its array of specialty or vocational schools (*senmon gakkō*), junior colleges, and universities, but high turnover means persistent labor shortages (Kakiuchi et al 2015). Employment conditions for childcare workers are generally poor. In 2016, it has come to be commonly reported that childcare workers earn a monthly average of ¥219,000, more than ¥100,000 lower than the overall industry average of ¥333,000¹⁾. The low pay, coupled with the physically and emotionally taxing nature of the job, result into high turnover. One consequence is a huge pool of so-called latent childcare workers, persons with child care qualifications, and often child care experience as well, who are not working in

1) Suzuki Wataru (2016) argues that the figure is misleading because it understates relatively high wages paid to civil servant child care workers. However, local governments have been reducing their numbers for years in order to reduce personnel costs; see Kanbayashi (2012, 2015).

the industry. Their numbers are estimated at between 700,000 to 840,000. The government has recently started offering financial incentives to draw them back.

In a survey conducted by MHLW in 2013, poor employment conditions were the main reasons given by qualified child care workers for not working in the industry²⁾. The leading reason was low pay, at 47.5 percent; third was worry about the heavy responsibilities or possibility of accidents, at 40 percent; fourth was concern about one's own health, at 39.1 percent; and fifth was concern about difficulty in taking break time, at 37 percent. In the author's own interviews over the years, child care workers tend to state that they don't really get to take breaks because there are barely enough staff to handle the kids, and they have generally not been at the type of poorly run facilities described by Kobayashi. The second main item in the 2013 survey was interest in other occupations, at 43.1 percent, suggesting a different kind of problem, namely that other occupations are also attractive to capable people, especially as barriers to professional jobs for women break down. Retaining responsible caregivers is also important because, according to numerous accounts, many childcare workers do not take their jobs seriously, partly because of poor or indifferent leadership (e.g., Kobayashi 2015). Some childcare workers, including mothers with experience raising their own children, simply do not understand how to handle children in an institutional setting.

Economist Suzuki Wataru (2016) argues that the costs of licensed child care service are simply too low: the real cost of care in Tokyo is ¥150-200,000 per month, he observes, but fees are in the ¥20-30,000 range, so local governments scramble to increase supply. To be sure, large differentials in cost and quality between public and private operators have long been regarded as a major weakness in the system, and, given the nation's fiscal distress and need to raise taxes, it may make sense to reduce differences by increasing the cost of licensed care (especially for higher income families, though this already occurs to varying extents). But the author is not convinced that market-distorting low costs per se are the problem - there is strong need for increased good-quality service, quite apart from cost.

Of course, a problem longstanding in Japan, along with the US, is that voters are very averse to paying taxes but unhappy when services are lacking or curtailed. Inokuma recounts an anecdote about a woman in Saitama who complained to civil ser-

2) Reported by Fukoin (2016). There were 958 respondents, conducted by Hello Work offices in areas with large waiting lists.

vants about not being able to get into a licensed child care center; the annoyed staff responded, You wanted *komuin* (civil servant) numbers reduced (Inokuma 2014:78).

Part 2 Politics of the Waiting List

The waiting list (*taiki jido*) has come to serve as the symbol of Japan's child care problem, and the term has accordingly come to be quite politicized (Inokuma 2014: see especially Chapter 2). For years, under the long-ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), child care was largely neglected, especially since party's conservative wing were largely concerned with holding welfare costs and keeping women engaged in their traditional roles as homemakers. The Angel Plan (1994) was the first serious effort at shifting the cost of child from families to society. Reflecting the new policy priority of providing support to prospective working mothers, the term waiting list was first officially reported in 1995. But it was Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro who made waiting list an everyday term, and his second successor as prime minister, Fukuda Yasuo (2007-08, following the semi-disastrous first administration of Abe Shinzo in 2006-07), who raised the bar again with an ambitious ten-year target (one reason, perhaps, why his support among women polled much better than among men). In the late 2000s, the Democratic Party further upped the ante by making strong pledges to help child-rearing families.

However, policymaking reality was different from the quasi-populist pledges, since at the same time politicians were promising to improve services they were also pledging to hold down tax burdens, especially through the populist measure of slashing public sector employment, including child caregivers and persons in related areas such as food preparation. The Trinity cost-cutting policy agenda pushed by Koizumi reduced the amount of money channeled from the central to regional and local governments, and indirectly encouraged the advance of privatization of child care services. In 2007, there were more children in private than in public sector daycare centers for the first time. Furthermore, there was a considerable jump in the number of families seeking to place children in daycare centers following the Lehman Shock of late 2008. As is well known by now throughout Japan, rising supply as well as more difficult economic conditions have stimulated rising demand, as more couples seek to place children in daycare so that both can work. In fiscal 2014, for example, spaces increased 146,000, but official MHLW waiting list also increased by 1800. It is now established that real latent demand is some 80,000, although one private sector think tank calculated the real demand at 1.71 million, figuring in

many families who have wanted child care service but never applied (*Nihon Keizai Shinbun* 2016.03.31).

Nevertheless, the stakes, along with parental expectations, had been raised, and many local politicians were beginning to make eliminating waiting lists pieces of their electoral agendas. Best known in this regard was probably Hayashi Fumiko, backed by the LDP, who made eliminating the waiting list the main plank in her policy platform when running for mayor of Yokohama City. She proceeded to achieve nationwide recognition (and high praise from Abe) for eliminating the city's waiting list in 2013 - except that she eliminated it only on paper (Inokuma 2014: Chapter 1). The devil is in the definition of the term, and how local governments actually interpret (or manipulate) it. For example, many mothers raising small children will do job searches largely by internet, but they went uncounted in Yokohama if they did not go to official the official Hello Work job assistance centers. The City also declined to count children in Yokohama's unlicensed daycare centers that received subsidies (though the cost of those centers was still higher and quality generally lower than in the licensed centers). In addition, children do not get counted if parents refuse to consider appropriate centers recommended by officials, but the definition of "appropriate" is malleable and varies by local government. The definition was simpler until 2005 - it was everyone who wanted into a licensed daycare center but could not. However, as expectations rose and local governments came under increasing pressure, the waiting list numbers became a source of embarrassment, so many local governments began to fudge, most often by not counting people in unlicensed child care centers that received any kind of subsidy, or by using a definition different from that of MHLW. According to Inokuma, the resulting proliferation of dodgy accounting means that accurate comparisons across areas has become impossible.

To be sure, Yokohama under Mayor Hayashi was doing much more than misleading voters - it did indeed substantially, by more than 8,000, the number of children in daycare. The city had proportionately few facilities compared to other major cities when Hayashi took office, so there was considerable ground to be made up. Nevertheless, the "elimination" was a fabrication that angered many observers. The mayor of Tokyo's huge Setagaya Ward, well known as the country's *taiki jido waasuto* (the "worst" (largest) waiting list), complained, since the ward reportedly does not fudge numbers, but also draws strong criticism since its numbers consistently dwarf those of other local governments.

Part 3 Abe Shinzo and the Blog

Prime Minister Abe Shinzo has made helping mothers get into the work force a central pillar of his economic stimulus/reform agenda. His administration's new agenda includes the Dynamic engagement of all citizens policy and the Law to Support Active Women. Abe originally pledged to increase the number of slots in licensed centers by 400,000 in five years from fiscal year 2013. By end March 2015 (the end of fiscal 2014), 219,000 slots had been added - yet the waiting list grew as ambitious and optimistic policy proposals stimulated demand by encouraging more parents to seek slots. Abe responded by raising the stakes. In his proposal of November 2015 to encourage Dynamic engagement of all citizens, he announced that an additional 100,000 slots would be created. While the attention to the child care problem was naturally welcome, the proposal failed to deal with the core problems pointed out above, including poor pay and employment conditions, and low quality and standards in many centers. In addition, there were suspicions that some of the Administration's recent gender-friendly policies reflect a political imperative to strengthen support among women rather than a sincere effort to improve services for families and children.

Abe suddenly lost control over the national narrative in mid-February this year when an angry blog struck a national nerve (Osaki 2016.03.07; Brasor 2016). Titled "Hoikuen Ochita Nihon Shine!" (I couldn't get day care! Drop dead, Japan!) and posted anonymously on a popular website, the message dispensed with the usual polite phrasing and seethed with anger about the alleged failure of the Abe government keep promises to help women work productively, and about the haughty treatment of local officials. (The media later identified and contacted the writer, a mother in Tokyo in her 30s, for follow-up discussion.) The blog stimulated political activity calling for an increase in daycare services, including a rally in front of the Diet building on March 5 and an online petition that culminated with a group of mothers handing over 28,000 quickly gathered signatures to Health, Labor and Welfare Minister Yasuhisa Shiozaki on March 9. In addition, the issue helped catapult to quick fame Yamao Shiori, an opposition leader who used the blog to confront and embarrass Abe in a February 29 televised Diet hearing. Newspaper accounts differ, some suggesting that Abe was ill-informed and ill-prepared, but others claiming that Yamao, perhaps a bit underhandedly, broke a common-practice agreement not to reference a message filled with dirty language during a public or televised event.

Regardless, Yamao emerged a winner from the encounter, being named policy chief of the newly formed Democratic Party in late March (*Japan Times* 2016.03.25).

Abe and some other conservatives at first dismissed the blog, emphasizing that it was anonymous and loaded with crude language - that was politically tone-deaf, since the blogger was expressing the frustrations of tens of thousands of parents, some of whom have lost jobs because of inability to place children in care. In any case, Abe further highlighted that his Administration had already enacted policies to enlarge child care facilities and staffing. MHLW data show that 72,430 new child care slots were created in fiscal 2013 and 146,257 in fiscal 2014, actually surpassing the government's goal of creating 200,000 slots in those two years. The fiscal 2016 budget draft proposes spending ¥119.1 billion on child care, largely to open another 200,000 slots over two years. Despite these efforts, the waiting list has hovered stubbornly high for the past several years; the 23,167 waiting children nationwide in April 2015 were up 1,796 from the previous year.

The political controversy nevertheless inspired a new round of policymaking efforts (e.g., Ninomiya and Oda 2016). Abe announced on March 11 that he would establish a task force to devise new measures, and the LDP's coalition partner Komeito suggested adding additional spending. "We should thoroughly enhance support measures for child-rearing families in a bid to realize a virtuous cycle of growth and distribution," stated Abe that day at a meeting of the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy (*Japan Times* 2016.03.13), which was meeting to plan an agenda to boost Japan's annual nominal gross domestic product to ¥600 trillion. Some members of the Council suggested additional measures to support child-rearing families, including making school lunches free and reducing children's medical expenses. "Applications for nursery schools have increased at a pace faster than we can provide places for," Abe responded on March 14 to questioning in the Diet. "We will do our utmost to cut waiting lists to zero so that people can both work and raise children" (Ninomiya and Oda 2016).

Abe clearly was concerned about political implications of the child care embarrassment, especially with a summer Upper House election approaching, and his support among women weak (see *Asahi* 2016.03.30:2). Abe's male-female support gap has nearly always been large, generally around eight to ten points³⁾, presumably because women are

3) In surveys going back twenty years, the male-female gap in his second (current) Government is the worst, surpassing even that of Obuchi Keizo. Yet his first Government (2006-07) boasted the highest gap in support of women over men, ahead of the next-ranked Fukuda and Noda governments. See Nikkei (2016.04.17).

less likely than men to believe that Abenomics has revived the economy, and because they oppose the Abe Administration's efforts to strengthen the military and revise the Constitution (Nikkei 2016.04.17). Even before the blog-triggered controversy, the Abe Administration had been trying new ways, including social media and regional meetings, to convince women that they were benefiting from recent policies (Asahi 2016.04.17:12). In response to rising criticism, on March 24, the LDP announced an emergency proposal that included ¥17.7 billion for fiscal 2016, largely to raise childcare worker wages 1.9 percent, or ¥6,000 a month. One goal was to bring latent childcare workers back to the field. On March 24, Komeito, the LDP's coalition partner, called for raising pay for childcare workers by about 4 percent. Komeito wants to use improved child care and higher pay for the workers as means to alleviate women's unhappiness about its role in supporting new military policies in 2015.

Hoping to capitalize on women's annoyances with the Government, the Democratic Party, last September, established a new political school to deal with women's concerns, and on March 15 this year started up the Wait List Emergency Headquarters. The party (which merged with Ishin no Kai in March to form the Minshintō, still called Democratic Party (DP) in English) has joined other opposition parties in calling for a huge ¥50,000 per month pay increase for childcare workers. Suzuki Wataru argues against the proposal on the grounds that it would raise wages not only in big cities where waiting list are long, but in regions where there is no waiting list; he observes also that it does not deal with related occupations such as cooks and medical staff. Leaving aside for now the question of whether regional staff also deserve raises, Suzuki's points underscore the suspicion that the opposition party demand is less carefully formulated than politically opportunistic. The Democratic Party evinced little concern for care workers during its three and one-half years in office from 2009. Furthermore, it continued the LDP's policy of reducing public sector employment, necessitating the creation of more low-paid non-regular child care positions in the public sector to replace the declining ranks of regular workers (Kanbayashi 2012). As a result, non-regular ratios in the public sector are especially high for child care workers (52.9 percent according to a recent government survey) and for *Gakudo* (elementary school age) care workers (92.8 percent). Not only are these workers poorly compensated, but all are on time-limited contracts, which often cannot be renewed. (Although local governments conclude the contracts, the central government strongly influences shaping and enforcement of rules, and it has been pressing local governments not to extend job security to non-regular civil servants.) Hence, even as

the Japanese government seeks to keep more people in the profession, it is also forcing many out, or at least making it difficult for them to keep working continuously.

In any case, the Abe Administration, along with its sudden decision to raise wages, is continuing the core policy of aggressive deregulation, especially by lowering standards to increase capacity. Beginning April 2016, minimum staffing ratios were reduced by one-third, and elementary school and *yochien* (roughly kindergarten) qualifications could be used to obtain child care posts (Yomiuri 2016.03.21). The Administration is encouraging local governments to raise the limits on numbers of children in small-sized centers (which handle exclusively infants up to two years of age) from 19 to 22, and to lower space and staffing standards in line with the lower national minimum standards. For example, for one- to two-year-old children, Tokyo's Setagaya Ward requires at least one caregiver for every five children, while the national minimum standard is one for every six children. Since there are 2,184 authorized daycare centers in Tokyo, the government calculates that if each facility would accept one additional child, the number of children on waiting lists in the Japanese capital would decrease some 30 percent. However, many local governments have higher standards precisely because it is widely believed that the national minimum standards are far too low to protect children's health and development. Along with the central government, Osaka Prefecture is pushing deregulation in an effort to revive economic growth, especially by using its status as a *tokku* (special economic zone) modify regulations to quickly eliminate its waiting list and reduce facility shortages. Governor Matsui Ichiro has proposed a major weakening of standards to Regional Economic Revival Minister Ishiba Shigeru.

Part 4 The Child Care Worker Problem

Along with overall supply, quality of care and worker conditions have increasingly become major issues. This is significant in two respects. First, Japan has long had the reputation for having excellent child care service, but some reports are now questioning quality, even in licensed centers, especially by tying it to rapid expansion, neglect of worker interests, and the increasing role of private providers. Second, the employment conditions of childcare workers have long been overlooked, although it has been clear that most are underpaid and virtually all overworked.

As Kakiuchi Kunimitsu and his collaborators emphasize, childcare workers generally have low social standing and earn low wages (Kakiuchi et al 2015). Their employment

problems have long been overlooked by researchers as well as the public, and there is not even a comprehensive national survey of childcare workers and their employment conditions. The image of childcare workers may have suffered because some are civil servants, who sometimes come in for bashing in Japan (notably about a decade ago). At that time, it was sometimes misleadingly suggested that childcare workers were overpaid, though regular (and relatively well-paid) civil servants account for only a portion of the work force.

Kobayashi Miki (2015), a journalist specializing in youth and women's labor issues, uses extensive interviews with parents, caregivers, center managers, and other persons involved in the child care industry to sketch a portrait of a distressed system in a new book. She launches especially harsh criticism at private companies, portraying them as committed to profit and disinterested in the wellbeing of employees, families, children, or society at large. One licensed center, for example, nominally meets the requirements for space, but fills one room with so many shelves and supplies that the most of the space is unusable for care. Many centers have no outdoors space to play in (in principle, the children can play in parks, but understaffing means that moving them between park and center can be nerve-racking, or simply does not happen). In another case, a diligent daycare worker bought games and equipment out of her own pocket, and borrowed books from a library on her own time, since the center provided almost nothing (Kobayashi 2015: 63).

Kobayashi's interviews and research suggest that the emphasis on profit and cost-cutting means that experience is not appreciated, even though experience is regarded by child care professionals as essential to quality (and safe) care. So is maintaining a balanced age ladder, partly so younger workers can handle more of the most strenuous activities, but also to ensure that skills and knowledge get transmitted from one cohort to the next. Not only do private firms handle workers as disposable, argues Kobayashi, they are probably quietly pleased when veterans depart, along with their higher seniority- or experience-based pay packages (though these never rise high in the private sector). They rarely trouble themselves to ensure stable staffing, and often shift workers around to minimize staffing. They at times call on ordinary untrained agency temporaries.

The mainstream media has recently begun to report that child care industry pay is low, and that work conditions are poor as well. According to a 2014 Tokyo survey, reported by Kobayashi (p. 55), 16 percent of childcare workers think about quitting, with the figure higher in private operations. The leading reasons are, in order, pay and

workloads. Another survey indicates that nearly all childcare workers feel fatigue. Professional qualifications provide little insulation. In one of Kobayashi's examples (p. 78-83), a nurse served in a private child care chain center, enabling the company draw an allowance from the government by having a medical worker on the premises. However, the center was so badly understaffed that she not only worked alongside the regular child care providers, possibly neglecting her own nursing duties, but went to work early every day to clean the toilets (the company declines to hire cleaners, adding to the caregivers' workloads).

In a grim irony, so-called *matahara* (maternity harassment) is apparently common in child care centers. Kobayashi uses survey data from left-wing national labor federation Zenroren along with a flood of data from one of her earlier books to indicate that Japanese childcare workers suffer a distressingly disproportionate level of miscarriage and premature birth (Kobayashi 2015:71). This largely occurs because of excess workloads, along with pressure to continue working too late into pregnancy (dedication to their young charges is easily manipulated by employers and uncaring superiors).

Several researchers have provided further data on the problems, especially through a recent large-scale survey of work conditions in Hokkaido (Kawamura 2015). 2,381 persons (97 percent of them women) responded. As throughout Japan, conditions varied greatly between large cities, such as Sapporo, and smaller or regional cities. The latter generally had fewer children than their limits, while overcapacity (including over eighty percent of private centers) was the norm in large cities. There were the usual large wage differentials between regular and non-regular caregivers. (Interestingly, the respondents included both individual childcare workers and center managers, and the latter were consistently more negative or pessimistic than the workers.) The survey indicated that there is rising demand for more services (such as extended care hours) and higher quality, including closer contact with parents and with schools, but that heavier workloads make it hard to carry out those tasks. Furthermore, new guidelines are supposed to enhance professionalism by, for example, encouraging more systematic skill development and record keeping; however, given the inadequacy of staffing, then, the new guidelines risk worsening real conditions by increasing workloads. The survey finds that eighty percent of child care center managers believe that burdens on their workers have increased (Kawamura 2015:94-5).

The rapid opening of new centers makes matters worse. Often, parents cannot really check out a new center because construction or renovation may continue up to the last

moment, or because staff are not yet hired (or have yet to be reassigned from other workplaces). Moreover, many private centers are allegedly run by managers with no child care experience (or concern). In one case described by Kobayashi (2015:91), a mere two weeks before opening, the new care leaders and the manager for a corporate-run center had yet to be chosen, so other employees filled in during interviews with parents. In other cases, childcare workers have turned over before a center has even started up. In another dispiriting instance, a mother recounted that the manager had atrocious communication skills; she soon found out that at least part of the problem was that he totally lacked experience, but had been rushed into a center management position virtually unprepared because the chain was opening centers so quickly (Kobayashi 2015:21-27).

The press to increase supply means that standards are almost certainly still falling. Parents had long assumed that licensing meant that quality and safety were assured, but many have been surprised to learn that even licensed daycare centers may be seriously understaffed, with official inspections far too few to catch serious problems (Nakamura 2016.05.02). Critics have long noted that understaffing is rife throughout the national and local bureaucracies, making safety-related inspections largely ineffective. One unusually candid daycare center manager related his frustrations to Kobayashi (pp. 35-36) at being pressured to accept far more children than his facilities could properly handle (“we’ve got them sleeping in the halls”). Subsidies present another problem, since the temptation to abuse is high, particularly given lack of inspection staff. In a recent scandal, a family-run quasi-private (*shakai fukushi hojin*) center passed subsidy money to family members, who were not really working, instead of the caregivers (Maeda 2016). One implication is not only that the money is wasted, but that subsidies may lure into child care the type of unscrupulous people most likely to endanger kids through neglect, even if they are not overtly abusive.

To deal with the excess demand, local governments generally use point systems to try to rank families by need, but the system is notoriously rigid. It tries to give priority in placement and choice to families according to obvious need, such as having two working spouses or being low-income, but the criteria in practice often produces perverse results. They frequently disadvantage people in serious need of assistance, notably the numerous working persons classified as self-employed (Kobayashi 2015:34-36; Osaki 2016.04.17). Some self-employed are virtual employees deliberately mis-classified by employers seeking to hold down social insurance costs, while some professionals working freelance (such as photographers) may have irregular incomes, making them suspect to officials.

The point system also favors families in which both spouses are regular employees over those with one regular and one non-regular - economically, the priority should seemingly be reversed. (To be fair to local officials, many of them overworked, the heavy demand probably means that no system can be equitable.) Another problem is that parents are sometimes counseled to game the system. In one case, local officials told a mother she had little chance to get into a licensed center, and counseled placing her young child in an unlicensed facility for a year (Osaki 2016.04.17). “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?”

Although the Abe Government is emphasizing its support for working women - including a newly proclaimed commitment to equal work for equal pay - and for child-rearing families, it has continued official policies that perpetuate the core problems. One of the most troubling is that of steadily reducing the ranks of regular civil servants, who are replaced in turn by low-paid insecure non-regular public sector employees, many of them daycare workers (Kanbayashi 2012; Kobayashi 2015:82-83). In many public sector daycare centers, over half of the caregivers are now non-regular. This practice is not only unfair but inefficient. Since non-regular caregivers are typically excluded from meetings, they often lack the information to perform their tasks properly. Some non-regular workers are veterans who are returning to the workplace, but do not want to work full time (often because of the poor work conditions). Not only is pay bad, but one survey suggests that veterans working as non-regular child care workers often quit because of dissatisfaction about being relegated to doing *zatsuyo* (errands; or routine and menial tasks), not to mention lack of any voice to improve subpar practices they had to observe.

Conclusion

Critics commonly allege that child care policy is increasingly driven by numbers: the government uses deregulation and various stop-gap measures to reduce the increasingly embarrassing waiting lists, while private operators are only concerned about profits. That creates a double-pronged assault on quality and even safety. In this sense, the rapid growth being pressed by the current Abe Administration may be creating problems for the future.

Arguably, however, the greater problem is the failure to resolve longstanding

employment problems, especially long work hours and obstacles to taking childcare leave. If these problems could be relieved, the current child care supply problems would be greatly alleviated. In addition, the government needs both to tighten regulation of private operators, and to end its own discriminatory employment practices, which relegate thousands of childcare workers to low pay and anxiety about future employment. Reforming some basic employment practices would greatly improve life chances for many children.

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