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## Childcare Programs for Working Parents in Japan: Problems and Progress

### **Introduction**

This semester, I volunteered at an after-school program called Asobee that provides a safe place for children, who may have working parents, to come after school and play until evening.

Asobee provides services from 2:30 to 5:00 pm on weekdays and from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm on Saturday, allowing parents to work full-time hours without leaving their children home alone for long amounts of time. The program is provided through the Musashino City municipal government, which employs the staff and provides safety officers called White Eagles to regularly check on the operation of the facilities. While Asobee does not charge participation fees, I am aware that Musashino City also provides a priced program for after-school care that provides more structure and guided learning for children. I believe that the free program provides a much-needed service to working-class families with two working parents and/or single parents, but I want to learn more about the demand for such services in Japan. In this paper, I will examine the status of available childcare services in Japan, including the variety of services and prices and whether availability is able to match demand, as well as the efforts to promote childcare across the country.

### **Historical Development of Childcare in Japan**

In Japan, childcare has historically been conceptualized as a way to support young mothers through the first few years of children's lives, when children require intensive supervision and care. The very first formal childcare centers in Japan developed during its industrial age, around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and by the 1940s, municipalities were required to provide subsidized childcare for children under the age of 5 in households with single parents, two working parents, and disabled parent(s) (Palley & Usui, 2008).

Today, two parallel systems of nationally provided childcare exist before elementary school. The *yochien* (kindergarten) system is intended to provide educational support, allowing children to get ahead in school from a young age. The *yochien* system is overseen by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT), but over 60% of institutions are privately operated and can be very expensive, making the *yochien* system

primarily catered towards the middle and upper classes (Palley & Usui, 2008). In contrast, the *hoikuen* (nursery) system is administered by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare (MHLW), and has become the primary way for local governments to fulfill the entitlement Japanese families with two working parents or a single parent have to childcare for children aged 5 and under as granted by the 1947 Child Welfare Law. These *hoikuen* establishments are accredited by the government, require extensive licensing for caregivers, are available for at least 8-10 hours a day 6 days a week, and are subsidized at national, prefectural, and local levels of government so that families pay an average of 40% of the total cost, with the price set on a sliding scale by income (Yamaguchi, Asai, & Kambayashi, 2018). Enrollment in these programs is very high. By 1980, over 80% of 4-year-olds and over 90% of 5-year-olds were enrolled in either a *yochien* or *hoikuen*, and the enrollment rate has continued to rise (Palley & Usui, 2008).

Yet, there are many problems with the current system. Mainly, the *yochien* and *hoikuen* systems do not ensure full coverage for all parents that need them. This is because, while many *hoikuen* have expanded their services to include infants and toddlers, the primary focus of both *yochien* and *hoikuen* institutions is on children of ages 3 to 5. This creates gaps in care for children younger than 3 and older than 5. For children under 3, a recent phenomenon of “baby hotels” that provide 24-hour care for infants aged 0 to 3 has started to develop. However, these “baby hotels” are privately run and largely unregulated, which has led to serious concerns about the quality of care provided (Palley & Usui, 2008). As such, many parents looking for childcare for children under 3 turn to *hoikuen* facilities. Because *hoikuen* are highly regulated, they are required to maintain a staff-to-child ratio of 1:6 for children under 3. Many institutions do not have the staff or funding to accommodate the demand given these requirements, and young children end up waitlisted. In 2007, 18,000 children were waitlisted nationwide (Palley & Usui, 2008) and in 2011, 83% of children waitlisted for childcare were under the age of 3 (Yamaguchi et al., 2018).

Families with children older than 5 run into the problem of the “*sho-ichi no kabe*,” meaning “first grade wall,” which describes how availability of full-time childcare options drops dramatically once children enter elementary school. Younger elementary school children have short school hours and long vacations between terms, which makes it hard for working parents to arrange for childcare for their younger elementary-age children who cannot yet be trusted to take care of themselves alone for long periods of time (Nippon Communications Foundation, 2019).

However, enrollment in a *hoikuen* is no longer an option for these elementary school children. As such, after school care programs are necessary. There are currently over 1.2 million children between the ages of 6 and 9 enrolled in after school care programs, although there are still over 17,000 children waitlisted nationwide (Nippon Communications Foundation, 2019).

### **Childcare and Societal Change**

The provision of childcare is important to the wellbeing and healthy development of children who have parents who are unable to provide full-term care. However, comprehensive childcare systems can have societal impacts beyond the individual benefits to families with children. Japan is currently facing societal issues such as a falling birthrate, an aging society, an economic decline, gender inequality, and a lack of female involvement in the labor force. The modern trend of 3-generation households being replaced by nuclear families has exacerbated these problems (Yamaguchi et al., 2018). Childcare systems can be a solution to all of these issues through making it more feasible for women to join the labor force and raise a family at the same time, allowing both female employment and birth rates to rise, which will stimulate the economy and provide the impetus for a cultural shift towards recognizing women as equals to men in society and in the workplace.

Japan has a long way to go in terms of promoting gender equality in society and in the workplace. According to a 2013 report by the World Economic Forum, out of 135 tracked nations, Japan ranked only 79<sup>th</sup> in terms of female participation in the workforce and 105<sup>th</sup> in general work-based gender equality (Chanlett-Avery & Nelson, 2014). One of the major reasons for this gender disparity appears to be a lack of childcare options and a culture that pressures women to be full-time mothers. About 70% of working women who have children leave the labor force for at least a decade after having their first children (Lee & Lee, 2014), and about 40% of women who leave the labor force before retirement age report doing so because of childcare concerns (Song, 2015). However, when childcare is provided, there is a statistically significant positive effect on labor force participation in the short term and fertility rates in the long term (Lee & Lee, 2014). Contrary to popular belief, increased female participation in the labor force would not have a negative impact on the fertility rate in Japan as long as childcare was accessible. This is because the availability of childcare would make it more feasible for working women to start a family without career repercussions and could reverse the trend of

women delaying or forgoing marriage in favor of careers. This has become a severe problem for fertility rates recently, with nearly a third of women in their early 30s still unmarried (Chanlett-Avery & Nelson, 2014).

Although the provision of childcare has the potential to do a lot of good for female labor participation and fertility rates, it will not be enough on its own. A larger cultural shift around gender norms and workplace culture is necessary. Firstly, while one year of paid parental leave is available for both mothers and fathers in Japan, only about 2 percent of fathers take any parental leave, leaving the childrearing responsibility to mothers (Morrone & Matsuyama, 2010). There are strong cultural norms that pressure mothers to be the primary childrearsers and that pressure fathers to work long hours to fit in with Japanese business culture and be seen as the masculine “breadwinner.” Because of the work culture in Japan, only about 22% of fathers regularly get home before 7 pm (Morrone & Matsuyama, 2010). With long work hours as the cultural norm, moving to a system of dual-income households is difficult when most childcare programs are only set up to accommodate 8 hour workdays. While fathers are pressured to maintain their commitment to their places of employment at the expense of their family lives, mothers often receive the opposite social messaging, and can sometimes face “matahara,” short for “maternity harassment” if they return to work after having children, as they are seen as neglecting their childrearing duties (Chanlett-Avery & Nelson, 2014).

### **Current Policy Efforts**

Despite the incompleteness of childcare as a solution to societal problems, politicians have long recognized its potential benefits and pushed for an increase in the quality and scope of services. This began in earnest in 1994 with the first Angel Plan. At this time, the Japanese government was beginning to worry about Japan’s low birthrate and the ageing of society, and Angel Plans of 1994 and 1999 were passed, including a variety of measures to encourage young adults to have children and counteract the ageing trend. By the second Angel Plan in 1999, the goals to be accomplished by 2004 included providing childcare for 680,000 infants under 2 years old, expanding the number of extended hour (at least 11 hour) daycare centers to 10,000 nationwide, and expanding the number of after-school programs for lower-year elementary school children to 11,500 nationwide (Palley & Usui, 2008). This plan also introduced paid leave for childcare emergencies and subsidized companies that provided private daycare for employees. These

measures did help make it easier for working women to raise children, increasing the birth rate slightly, but did not completely meet the growing need for childcare in the country, as thousands of children were still left on waitlists (Palley & Usui, 2008). Furthermore, while the new childcare centers allowed more working women to have children, it did not allow for more women with children to join the workforce, as, due to the limited amount of space, families who already had full-time employment were given priority (Yamaguchi et al., 2018).

More recently, when Prime Minister Abe took power in 2012, he “proposed a very ambitious economic revitalization strategy, so-called ‘Abenomics,’ that is composed of the three arrows of aggressive monetary policies, flexible fiscal policies, and economic growth strategy” (Song, 2015). As a primary goal of the “third arrow,” Abe created a set of “womenomics” policies aimed at increasing female participation in the labor force in order to create sustainable economic growth. As discussed earlier, one of the major barriers to female employment is a lack of available childcare. With the goal of increasing the female labor force participation rate from 65% to 73% by 2020, the “womenomics” plans include such bold goals as achieving a zero-waiting list for childcare by creating 400,000 new spots in full time childcare centers, reducing the “*sho-ichi no kabe*” by providing after-school programs for 300,000 more children, and increasing gender parity by encouraging more fathers to take advantage of paternity leave, hopefully increasing the paternity leave rate from 2% to 13%, all by March 2020 (Song, 2015). These are good goals that are aimed at fixing some of the most prevalent cultural and structural problems preventing female employment. However, implementation has had mixed results.

There has been a recent trend towards privatization of childcare programs in Japan, and rather than reverse this trend in favor of government-provided institutions, Abe’s government has further encouraged the development of private childcare programs and private-public partnerships. This trend truly began in 2000, when the MHLW began allowing the private sector to establish licensed daycares in order to reduce the number of wait-listed children (Nishioka, 2018). By 2015, 60% of childcare programs had become privately operated, and the national government passed two new legal frameworks. The first of these, the ‘New Support Institutions for Children and Childcare’ framework, redefines childcare to include private and community-based services in addition to licensed *yochien* and *hoikuen*. The second, the ‘Public-Private Collaboration Type Daycare Center’ encouraged municipalities to partner with private companies to offer childcare, removing the subsidy for the construction of new childcare

facilities and replacing it with a grant for municipalities expanding childcare services in either sector (Nishioka, 2018). This deregulation allows for more flexibility in the kind of childcare programs offered because not all program staff is required to have extensive licensing, thus lowering the cost and encouraging the establishment of more programs with a greater variety of services offered. However, deregulation and privatization can also lower the quality of programs due to the decrease in licensing requirements and increase the cost for working families, as privately-owned for-profit programs are not required to adhere to the sliding-scale price adjustments used by federal programs (Palley & Usui, 2008).

In order to address the problem of the “*sho-ichi no kabe*,” Abe’s government has continued the work of the previous administration by expanding the “After School Classes for Children” and the “After School Children’s Club” projects run by MEXT and MHLW respectively. MHLW’s “After School Children’s Club” is open to children aged 6 to 9, and parents must provide proof of single parenting, two working parents, or parental disability to be eligible. In contrast, MEXT’s “After School Classes for Children” is open to all children without proof of need (Kanefuji, 2015). I have had firsthand experience with this type of program through Musashino City’s Asobee program, which appears to be following the guidelines of “After School Classes for Children.” This type of after-school program uses spare classrooms and schoolyards at the elementary schools, employs licensed educators as well as volunteer staff to watch the children, and is a locally planned and implemented system supported by federal and prefectural funding (Kanefuji, 2015). As of April 2014, 63% of Japan’s municipalities had implemented such programs, and the number has continued to rise. Besides the earlier considered social benefits to expanded childcare, these after school programs have been shown to consistently have positive effects on children’s physical health and social development, demonstrating another benefit of childcare programs (Kanefuji, 2015).

## **Conclusions**

Overall, it seems like the expansion of childcare programs has been a priority of the Japanese government, and there are a wide variety of options available to working parents. Unlike America, Japan has made childcare for working families with children under 5 an entitlement, and subsidizes such programs. However, there are still gaps in coverage, especially for children under 3 and over 5, and some of the deregulation efforts taken to increase the number of

programs have drawbacks for cost and quality. The expansion of childcare programs is having a hard time keeping up with the rising demand, and waitlists are still long in some areas. The priority given to mothers already in the workforce and the prevalence of cultural norms portraying men as breadwinners and women as caretakers mean that the childcare efforts alone will not be enough to substantially increase both fertility rates and female labor participation. However, the good quality and expansive *yochien*, *hoikuen*, and more recent after-school care programs that do exist provide a significant and measurable benefit to children, working parents, and Japanese society as a whole. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to participate in and learn more about such programs during my time in Japan.

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