

Thirty Successful Experiences of Redistribution, Reduction,
Recognition, Remuneration and Representation in Care Work

Urban planning from a gender and care perspective: Nagareyama, Japan



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Country and/or location of implementation: Nagareyama, Japan

Instances and/or legal framework responsible for its implementation: Municipal Government of Nagareyama, Japan

Since 2009, Nagareyama has used the slogan “Think motherhood, think Nagareyama” to publicize its own surroundings and public services for families, especially mothers. The idea was to promote a family-friendly environment where people could balance their families and careers. Nagareyama was one of the typical medium-sized Japanese cities that had experienced a rapidly shrinking and aging population. This demographic shift threatened the city's debt and, in turn, its existence. When Nagareyama officials became aware of this social reality, they began to devise strategies to make the city attractive for population growth. Various analyses and surveys of the city revealed that it was close to Tokyo's job centers and had abundant natural resources to attract young families. Additionally, surveys found that most women in Nagareyama wanted to balance their lives by achieving their career goals while having enough time to spend with their children. Based on these findings, the city began to design and offer public services that promoted maternal and familial well-being.

Nagareyama is located near central Tokyo, which can be reached in 30 minutes via a suburban train service connecting Tokyo and the Ibaraki prefecture. Since housing is more affordable outside Tokyo, families tend to live in cities in adjacent prefectures, such as Nagareyama, which is currently home to 79,046 households, 26.9% of which are married couples with children. An average family has 1.53 children, and only 0.4% of households are single parent. Overall, 60% of married women with preschool-aged children work outside the home, and this figure rises to 70% in the section/area of the city where the population is growing (Nagareyama Municipality, 2017b).

Yoshiharu Izaki, Mayor of Nagareyama, who has been in office since 2003, has extensive experience as a regional environmental planner and urban policy

16 Content regarding this good practice was prepared based on Hiramatsu, 2018.

analyst in the United States and Japan. He decided to undertake a program to transform Nagareyama into a place where young families could comfortably raise their children. One of the innovative strategies to cope with the difficulties was to push the program forward by establishing a municipal marketing department. Based on the results of their analysis, Nagareyama designed a three-pillar plan to attract families:

1. The development of organized urban green spaces
2. Increased public services and support infrastructure for child-rearing and education
3. The promotion of family activities and tourism events to attract non-residents. (Nagareyama Municipality, 2017a)

The mayor noted that, given the goal was to address the city's declining population and shrinking economy, marketing should target families with children, in which both parents work, as potential long-term residents. Mothers were also targeted with a particular marketing focus. "Generally, within families, women have the power to decide where to live," the mayor explained. "They take into consideration the quality of the environment and education for their children. The city identified the needs of these women through the survey and has provided services that address their priorities. Based on the survey, it was observed that women highly valued several specific qualities in a city, including:

1. Convenient access to public transportation and retailers
2. A suitable environment for parenting
3. Easy access to their place of work
4. Organized urban green spaces and parks
5. Career opportunities (Nagareyama Municipality, 2017a)

In response to the survey, Nagareyama undertook a series of programs aimed at meeting the needs of mothers and families and improving the quality of life in the city. The following three programs have been implemented with great success.

Child transportation services at the central train station

In Japan, 52% of mothers with preschool-age children are active in the labor market (General Statistics Bureau and Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2014). However, mothers living in larger cities often find it difficult to find childcare because of the considerable shortage of childcare facilities.

For working parents who commute by train between Nagareyama and Tokyo, dropping off and picking up their children from local day care centers every day at set times was a burden, and rush hour in Tokyo is so intense that parents have been seen taking their children with them in order to use day care facilities near their jobs (Japan-Guide.com, n.d.). Thus, most parents had to walk, bike, or drive to day care centers before heading to Tokyo. To further complicate matters, they could rarely use the day care center closest to their homes due to the severe shortage of these facilities (Ministry of Health, 2017). The situation was so dire that parents with three children of different ages often had to take them to three different day care centers located in three different districts. In Nagareyama, this occurs because of saturation in day care centers in populated areas, while there are fewer child registrations in day care centers farther away from the train station.

Nagareyama had an innovative idea and began offering a unique program that addressed this problem in order to make life less stressful for commuting parents. In 2007, the city began offering a school bus service at the train station, where parents could drop off their children to be transported to a day care center or kindergarten. The project was coordinated between representatives of the Department of Child Support and the Department of Children's Affairs, the Social Welfare Corporation, and "New Urban Life," a developer of a mixed-use commercial and retail facility located next to the train station where the drop-off and pick-up center was built. A second child transport point was subsequently opened at another train station, and today an estimated 45,000 children are transported each year from the stations to the day care centers.

Feedback from parents indicates this system has enabled new mothers to return to full-time work more quickly, as the pick-up center has flexible hours. The low price of the service is also key: it costs about USD 20 per month. Had the program been run by private companies, only a few families could afford it, but in Nagareyama, it is the municipality and the National Child Care Program that support and subsidize the program. The transport points, which are called "Forest Children's Garden," are run by specialized childcare professionals.

Prior to the introduction of the child transportation service, families in Nagareyama had to register and take their children wherever they could find a day care center or kindergarten. The kindergartens located closest to the train station have a high user demand. Day care centers located far from the central station had more openings, but often parents could not get there, or the trip was extremely cumbersome. This transportation service made it possible to

distribute the children evenly among day care centers and ease the burden on working parents who face tough daily commutes.

The children's transportation service has a drop-off and pick-up center inside the building, which is connected to the train station entrance. The center is open from 7 am to 9 am. Each of the five buses is assigned a specific route to take children to 32 daycare centers and kindergartens in the city at 9 a.m. The buses have a collective capacity to transport nearly 190 children to and from the center. After school, the buses pick them up from the kindergartens between 4:20 and 5 pm and return them to the train station. During the bus ride, teachers attend to the children, read books, sing songs, and play games with them, and then do the same at the pick-up center while the children wait for their parents to arrive between 5 and 6 pm. Most parents arrive at 6 pm, but this center offers extended hours and includes a children's dinner for JPY 350 (USD 3.20) for parents who work late.

Other support programs for mothers in Nagareyama

According to data from 2017, 81.8% of women take maternity leave, but only 3.16% of men take paternity leave. However, the number of men who do take such leave has increased in recent years (Nikkei, 2017). While many full-time employed women take maternity leave and later return to their jobs, women who choose to take long-term leave often face obstacles in returning to work.

Through surveys and interviews, Nagareyama City identified the difficulties encountered by mothers, and proceeded to launch entrepreneurship seminars for mothers in the city (Nagareyama Municipality, 2017a). Since the 2013 adoption of the Industrial Competitiveness Improvement Act, several Japanese municipalities have organized similar seminars to encourage innovation and revitalize their local economies (Yokohama City & Economic Affairs Bureau, 2017). However, Nagareyama has been the only municipality whose seminars specifically targeted mothers (Nakagawa, 2016). The city developed a three-month entrepreneurship program to help mothers implement their ideas and increase their employment opportunities and, in turn, promote local economic development. Three such programs were delivered with more than 50 female participants. Nagareyama provided childcare for mothers who needed it so they could focus on the program.

Nagareyama City also offers subsidies to its residents to start or relocate their businesses and services to vacant commercial properties in the city to promote local economic development and make better use of vacant properties. The city offers financial support of up to USD 10,000 to cover rent and remodeling costs for up to three years. Nagareyama resident, Eriko Ozaki, used this program to renovate an unused commercial building and set up a service called Trist in May 2016. The service, which was launched on Mother's Day in Japan, provides job search assistance and helps women work remotely, even outside the Trist office, to avoid or minimize commuting. Ozaki explained the idea for the services originated from her own experience and that of other mothers. She had worked full time in downtown Tokyo in various business strategy consultancies and then, like many others, found herself stressed and exhausted after having her first child. After having her second child, she quit her job, changed careers, and set up her own company, working from home, to support working mothers by implementing after-school programs and other services for children. Ozaki interacted with numerous working mothers through her work and strongly recognized a change in work style was needed for working mothers.

All this investment has paid off. Nagareyama has succeeded in attracting more families to the city and has experienced several positive demographic changes over the past 10 years. The population has recovered: the number of children per family rose from 1.16 in 2007 to 1.53 in 2017, which exceeds national and regional averages, and the number of married couples with children living in the city has increased significantly (Hiramatsu, 2018).

In its efforts to establish a family town with a focus on mothers, Nagareyama has enabled families with young children to live comfortably, creating opportunities to improve the personal well-being and professional development of women. The city's innovative initiatives included: the deployment of green spaces and tourism initiatives to promote green economic development and make the city an attractive place to live and raise a family; the operation of a bus service at two train stations where parents can drop off their children for transportation to day care; and support for training programs such as Trist, which help mothers return to work, and offer remote workplaces to reconcile employment and family responsibilities. These achievements have brought positive results for women in Nagareyama, generating a sense of civic pride among the city's residents. In the context of urban and community development in Japan, "civic pride" refers to the active participation in town planning by its residents. (Ito, 2016).

This urban planning strategy from a gender and childcare perspective is a good example of how an administration can make strategic use of its resources to provide well-being and developmental opportunities for families (mothers, fathers, and young children). It recognizes care work, reduces the amount of care in the hands of families by proposing innovative solutions to the daily drama parents experienced traveling to and from childcare centers. This has had a positive impact on job opportunities and professional growth, particularly for mothers. Another aspect of this policy that stands out is its contribution to building citizenship, helping the residents of Nagareyama feel committed to the planning of their city and actively contributing to its development and expansion. In short, the diagnosis has been key in identifying the needs of families, and the innovative solutions provided have been effective and comprehensive.

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