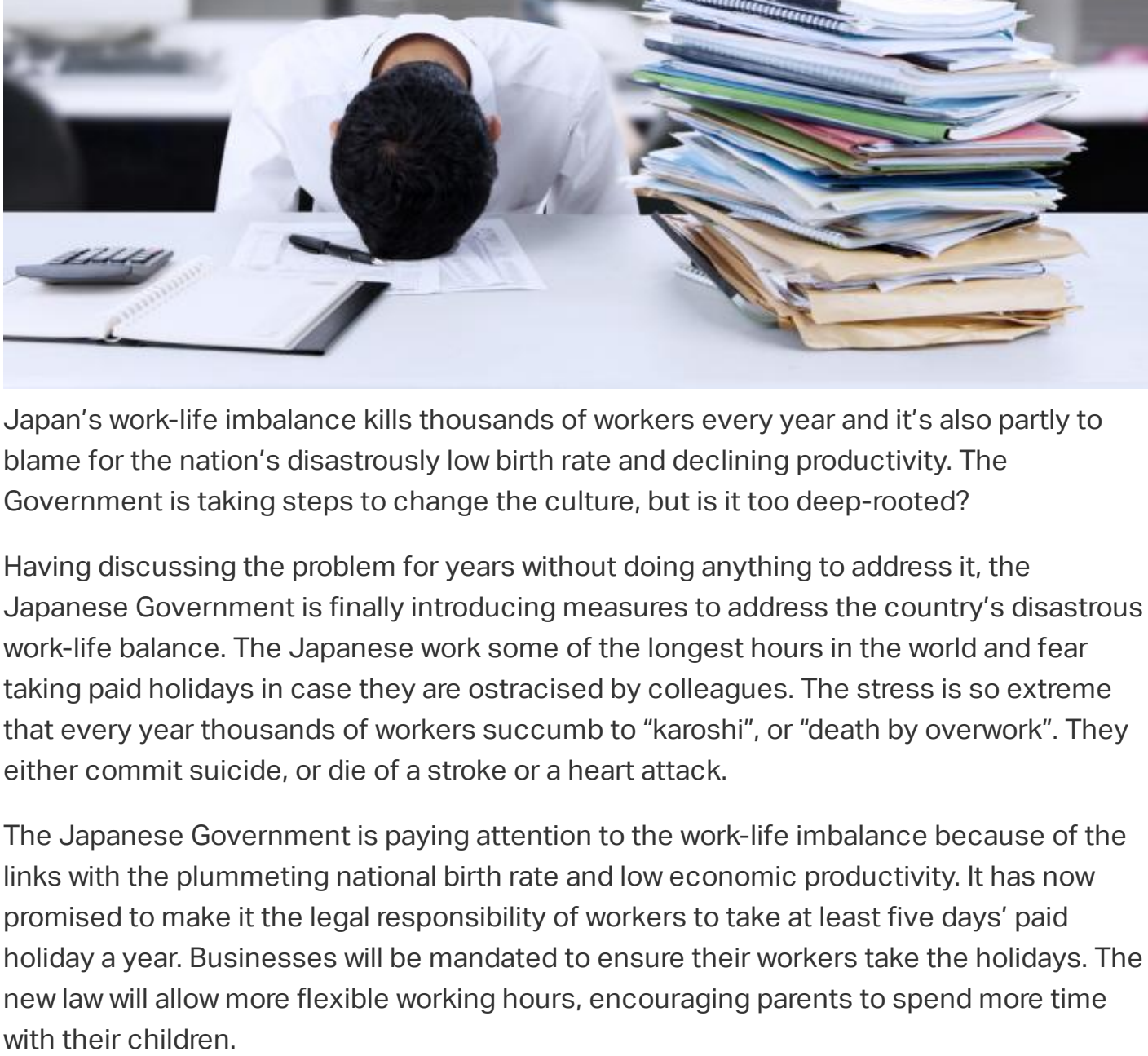


# Government moves to end Japan's culture of "death by overwork"

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Japan's work-life imbalance kills thousands of workers every year and it's also partly to blame for the nation's disastrously low birth rate and declining productivity. The Government is taking steps to change the culture, but is it too deep-rooted?

Having discussing the problem for years without doing anything to address it, the Japanese Government is finally introducing measures to address the country's disastrous work-life balance. The Japanese work some of the longest hours in the world and fear taking paid holidays in case they are ostracised by colleagues. The stress is so extreme that every year thousands of workers succumb to "karoshi", or "death by overwork". They either commit suicide, or die of a stroke or a heart attack.

The Japanese Government is paying attention to the work-life imbalance because of the links with the plummeting national birth rate and low economic productivity. It has now promised to make it the legal responsibility of workers to take at least five days' paid holiday a year. Businesses will be mandated to ensure their workers take the holidays. The new law will allow more flexible working hours, encouraging parents to spend more time with their children.

"The Government has to do something and I think they can make a difference even if it's just symbolic to begin with," said Professor Cary Cooper, an expert on work-life balance from Lancaster University's Management School. "The Japanese work-life balance is horrible because work is such an important part of their identity, especially for males. It's having a devastating effect on health, family life and the national birth rate. And it's also bad for business. For a long time, productivity was high in Japan, but it's declined due to massive burn-out problems."

Government data shows 22% of Japanese work more than 49 hours a week, compared with 16% of US workers and 11% in France and Germany. Japanese employees are entitled to an average of 18.5 days paid holiday a year, but take an average of just nine days, according to Japan's labour ministry. In some high-stress industries, taking any holiday at all is perceived as an act of disloyalty to the company.

To avoid the shame attached to taking holidays, some workers prefer to call in sick.

"It's not that people don't want to go on holidays. It's just that collegial loyalty to the company means it's stigmatized. Workers have to find ways to get around it, so some will call in sick and take their holiday for that," said Dr Brigitte Steger, a senior lecturer in Japanese Studies at the University of Cambridge. "A Japanese friend tried to get eight days holidays, but was refused two days after the weekend. So she booked the plane anyway and called to say there was a problem with the flight. There's some informal leeway to stop people losing face."

For most Japanese employee, office life is so all-consuming that the companies provide residences for mini-breaks where they mix socially with co-workers. Their social lives revolve around the office. Long days stretching past midnight in Tokyo offices are followed by visits to late-night bars for sessions of "nominication", an invented noun combining the Japanese word for drinking, nomu, and the English word "communication". Employees feel obliged to attend in order to forge connections and climb the corporate ladder.

No wonder Japanese workers sleep an average of just six hours and 22 minutes per night, according to a US National Sleep Foundation poll. This is the lowest level in the world and barely half of Japanese respondents regularly got a good night's sleep. Japanese companies are aware of the problem and many let employees sleep at work. Okuta, a home renovation firm near Tokyo, allows employees to take a 20-minute power nap at their desks. Meanwhile, Hugo Inc, an internet consulting company based in Osaka, allows workers to take a 30--minute siesta between 1pm and 4pm.

"But Japan has not always had such a punishing dedication to the workplace. According to Dr Brigitte Steger, in the early 20th century workers were quite happy to stay at home when they had earned enough money. "The post-war economic system was based on the gender division of labour. The male workforce was expected to work full time and be available for over-time, whilst all the reproductive work, including looking after the household and kids, was outsourced to women. Although more women now pursue careers, this culture is still with Japan. Full-time employees are expected to be available so that if work comes in at 4pm, they will work late to finish it by tomorrow and give up their evening."

International data reveals the extent of Japan's gender division. Female participation in the labour force is 63%, which is far lower than in other wealthy countries. After a first child, 70% of women stop working for a decade or more, compared with 30% in America. Many never return and even when they do it's usually to part-time roles. In 2012, women made up 77% of Japan's part-time and temporary workforce. Few Japanese women hold professional, technical or managerial roles. At senior managerial level, just 1% were female in 2011, according to McKinsey. The figure for other countries in the region was much higher. For China it was 9% and for Singapore it was 15%.

When working hours are so long, it severely restricts opportunities to meet the opposite sex. The difficulty of finding a partner has caused a drastic fall in the number of marriages and - partly because only 2% of Japanese babies are born of wedlock compared to 41% in the US - a steep decline in the national birth rate. In 2012, the average fertility rate for Japanese women was just 1.41 children, well below the 2.1 required to sustain the population. Without massive immigration, which would be deeply unpopular in conservative Japan, the country will lose a third of its current population of 127 million by 2060, according to the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research.

Dr Steger says the Government of Prime Minister Shenzo Abe has tried to address some of the issues by providing more support for women to allow them to return to the workplace. The most practical step has been to shorten waiting lists for child care by allowing more private companies into a previously state-dominated sector. Yet many Japanese women distrust day care so much that they remain reluctant to hand over their children to providers.

Government measures, however, will have a limited effect unless the companies are willing to change their culture, Steger argues. She says this is happening in pockets of the Japanese business environment. For example, at DeNA, an internet-services company, employees have begun to emulate colleagues in California by going home on time. And Mitsubishi Chemical Corporation is discouraging workers from staying in the office after 7pm. "Even though some companies are changing, it's not always easy to get workers to comply," said Steger. "One big insurance company tried switching off the lights after 6pm so the employees didn't work overtime. But they started taking in their own lamps!"

Most Japanese companies argue that they cannot relax their working culture because the economy is struggling. They are certainly right about the economy: Japan has record-high debt of nearly 250% of GDP. Debt service consumes about 43% of the government's revenues in spite of interest rates being close to zero. But, according to Professor Cary Cooper, the companies are wrong to believe that maintaining longer working hours will lead to higher productivity. He points to the UK, which has the longest working hours in the EU, but the lowest productivity per worker. Some Scandinavian countries, in contrast, have a superior work-life balance, but higher levels of productivity and higher scores than the UK on the happiness at work index.

Cooper says the Japanese culture of overwork is now spreading to China, which leads the world in exhaustion-related deaths. Chinese IT employees, in particular, have shown some of the highest levels of work-related stress with 98.8% reporting the negative influence of their job on personal health.

"China is now succumbing to a lot of the same problems as Japan as they have become obsessed with boosting productivity," said Cooper. "The UK also has a workaholic culture, but it's not as bad as Japan's because people do take their holidays. The US also has a workaholic culture, but it's different to Japan's and stress levels are on average much lower. Americans get far fewer holidays than in the UK. They're not entitled to any at all until they've worked for two years and the maximum allowance is 10 days, not nearly enough. But, with some exceptions, they don't work anything like the same number of hours as the Japanese from Monday to Friday. So the Japanese working culture is even more stressful and China is following suit."

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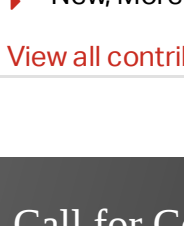
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