

Business

'Ingenious' fix for Japan's empty houses - homes for single moms

Empty and abandoned homes are a growing problem

BANGKOK: A Japanese charity that turns empty homes into housing for single mothers has won a major international award, drawing attention to the stigma and challenges that such women face in the wealthy nation. Little Ones, based in Tokyo, was named a World Habitat Award winner yesterday for converting vacant and abandoned houses into homes for single mothers at subsidized rates.

The non-profit has helped more than 300 single mothers find a home in Tokyo, Osaka and Chiba since its inception in 2008. "Japan has a culture that makes it difficult for women to work after having children, which makes life exceptionally hard for single mothers," said

Little Ones' chief executive Kunihisa Koyama. "Apartment owners often refuse single mothers because they are not considered financially stable. The social stigma, lack of economic opportunities and high costs in cities like Tokyo mean the majority of single mothers live in poverty," he said.

Japan is among the world's wealthiest nations, yet its single mothers are amongst the worst off. Fewer than half receive alimony, and many are often unable to work. The child poverty rate for working single-parent households in Japan is the highest among wealthy nations, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Japan's single-mother

households rose by about half to 712,000 between 1992 and 2016, the ministry of health said.

At the same time, empty and abandoned homes are a growing problem in the ageing nation, totaling 9 million homes, or about 14 percent of the housing stock. By 2033, it is estimated that about one-third of Japanese homes will be vacant as the population declines. A 2015 law to promote the reuse of abandoned houses, has enabled Little Ones to work with owners and local authorities to renovate such homes more easily with a government grant. "For a single mother and her children, safe and affordable housing is a starting point, so they can move forward in their lives," Koyama told the Thomson

Reuters Foundation.

Little Ones also provides a support network and other resources to the women, he said. The program is an "ingenious" use of vacant homes to address the "stigmatization and discrimination single mothers experience in access to housing", said Leilani Farha, the United Nations special rapporteur on the right to adequate housing. By renovating abandoned homes and bringing them back into use, the project is "physically improving neighborhoods for the community at large", the World Habitat Awards advisory group said in a statement. The awards, supported by UN Habitat, are presented to 10 innovative housing projects every year. —Reuters

Japan plans tighter regulation of tech giants

TOKYO: Japan is planning to tighten regulation of tech giants like Google and Facebook after an expert panel called for better oversight on competition and privacy, an official said yesterday. Japan has followed in the footsteps of other countries in scrutinizing the dominant role played by the world's largest information technology companies, including Big Four tech firms Google, Apple, Facebook and Amazon. The government has now issued a report based on expert opinion that urges new regulatory oversight plans by next year. Despite bringing benefits, tech giants "tend to monopolize the market through their features such as... low costs and economies of scale," the report said.

It calls for better protection of consumer privacy and for more fairness and transparency from the firms about technologies that control market access. "Based on the report, the government will officially announce principles for new regulations" in the next two weeks, a trade ministry official said. Japan's anti-trust authorities have already said they plan a probe into whether global tech firms are using their market leader positions to exploit contractors or obstruct competition. Japan's decision to tighten regulations comes as European authorities crack down on US tech giants.

Earlier this year, the European Union issued a record 4.34 billion euro (\$5 billion) anti-trust fine to Google, accusing it of using the Android system's huge popularity to promote its Google search engine and shut out rivals. Google has appealed the decision, arguing that the EU's accusations were unfounded, but said last month it would comply with the decision in order to avoid further fines. And the European Parliament in September approved a controversial EU copyright law that hands more power to news and record companies against internet behemoths like Google and Facebook, though the firms have pledged to fight that ruling. —AFP

Apple to build new \$1 billion campus in Austin, Texas

TEXAS: Apple Inc said yesterday it would spend \$1 billion to build a second campus in Austin, Texas that will house as many as 15,000 workers, amid a broader push by many US companies to create more jobs at home. The iPhone maker had announced at the start of the year it would invest \$30 billion in the United States, taking advantage of a tax windfall stemming from US President Donald Trump's sweeping tax reforms. The 133-acre campus in Austin will employ workers across various functions including engineering, R&D, operations and finance. The city is already home to the second largest number of Apple employees outside its headquarters in Cupertino, California.

Apple will also set up sites in Seattle, San Diego and Culver City, California and hire over 1,000 employees each in these locations, while also expanding operations in Pittsburgh, New York and Boulder, Colorado over the next three years. Many American multinationals have been facing political pressure to ramp up investments at home as part of Trump's "America First" policies, which have left the United States embroiled in a bitter trade war with China. The president has also warned of tariffs on iPhones and other Apple products imported from China.

Apple's technology rival Amazon.com Inc last month ended a months-long search for its second headquarters, picking New York City and an area just outside Washington, DC for massive new offices, with plans to create thousands of jobs. The new Austin campus will be located less than a mile away from Apple's existing facilities, and will first house 5,000 new employees with the capacity to expand to 15,000. The company, which last year moved into its sleek "spaceship" campus in Cupertino, said jobs at the new Austin center would include engineering, research and development, finance and sales functions. —Reuters



CALIFORNIA: A sign shows the new Apple Park Visitor Center at Apple's new headquarters in Cupertino, California. Apple unveiled plans yesterday, for a \$1 billion campus in Texas that will create jobs for the tech giant outside Silicon Valley, a move made without the fanfare of the recent Amazon headquarters bidding war. —AFP