

Beyond Invisibility: Great East Japan Disaster and LGBT in Northeast Japan

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The Great East Japan Disaster on 11 March 2011 caused death to an incredible number of people with many more still missing, [1] destroyed a huge amount of properties, and displaced numerous communities. On top of this there were gender-insensitive and gender-unequal evacuations, relief and reconstruction processes [2] that added further damage. But equally shocking was the dearth of information about and voices of different groups of so-called social minorities such as people with disabilities, non-Japanese speaking residents, children, the elderly, and those who are lesbian, bisexual, gay and transgender (LGBT). Among them, the LGBT people are probably the most invisible. Having been born and raised in Iwate prefecture, one of the prefectures affected by the disaster, I know that my prefecture is not an inclusive place for people of diverse communities. The fact that we hardly hear anything from LGBT survivors in coastal towns in the prefecture even after having established Iwate's first LGBT group is appalling. The disaster highlighted the invisibility of LGBT survivors and the difficulties they have faced in Japan's rural towns.

Invisibility of LGBT Survivors

While Japan does not penalize same-sex relationships or transgenderism, [3] the situation faced by LGBT people in Japan has been characterized by invisibility, marginalization, silent prejudice and stigmatization even before the disaster. While Japan's Constitution guarantees fundamental human rights and prohibits discrimination on the basis of "race, sex, social status or family origin," substantive

equality is not guaranteed to LGBT people. Japanese laws also do not protect them from discrimination and abuse. The government included "people in a difficult situation because of sexual orientation or living with gender identity disorders" in the latest Basic Plan for Gender Equality and "sexual minorities" in the latest Suicide Prevention Measures; and provided funds to the 24-hour LGBT hotline. But neither the government nor civil society organizations have adequately incorporated LGBT perspectives or issues into their policies.

The disaster made the invisibility, marginalization, silent prejudice and stigmatization suffered by LGBT people visible. "I totally forgot that I was a lesbian for a while after the disaster" - a friend of mine who lives in one of the coastal towns in northern Tohoku told me over the phone two months after the earthquakes and tsunami. When I asked a gay friend of mine in one of the worst disaster-hit towns in Iwate whether he was facing any difficulty because of who he was, he replied saying "I was never out as gay in my town. I never told anyone that I had a same-sex partner in my community. When we were on a date, we went to another town where nobody would know us. That's what it was

like before the disaster. So, I don't face any difficulty for being gay even after 11 March."

The only cases I came to know regarding LGBT survivors were about a transgender woman described as a "cross-dressing deviant fag at an evacuation shelter" by a volunteer, and about a trans-person [4] having refrained from using a shower at an emergency shelter for privacy reasons. These illustrate how life as LGBT has been difficult in northeast Japan before, on and after the day of the disaster.

It is said that LGBT people account for 4-10% of the population in any community in any country. The level of LGBT visibility depends on how understanding and inclusive a society is. Needless to say, LGBT people, including myself, do live in smaller towns in Tohoku. But since the establishment of Iwate's Rainbow Network about a week after the disaster we have not met any LGBT survivors who spent time at an evacuation shelter, lost their partners, families or job because of the tsunami, or have no option but to live in temporary housing till today for losing a house. This shows the level of understanding and inclusiveness of our community in the northern part of Japan. LGBT people in smaller towns are more afraid of the consequences of disclosing their sexuality, such as possible rejection by their family and friends, losing a job and place to live, and isolation and exclusion from community. A lot of them have practically no option but to hide an integral part of who they are and whom they love. That must be the reason why we have not met LGBT survivors of the Great East Japan Disaster.

Imagining LGBT Difficulties in the Disaster

After 11 March 2011, fellow LGBT activists from different countries including those who experienced disasters or worked with LGBT communities after the disasters in Haiti, Chile and Bangladesh contacted me. In Haiti, where the earthquake hit in January 2010, an aid non-governmental organization (NGO) faced difficulty in reaching out to LGBT survivors because of prejudice and stigma those people faced. It was more difficult for male same-sex couples to get relief supplies because supplies were distributed to children, the elderly and women first. In Chile, where the earthquake hit in February 2010, a transgendered woman was kicked out of temporary housing because of her gender identity. In Bangladesh where cyclones hit almost every year, LGBT people have been seen as a "shame on the family" and excluded from their family so that other family members could share more relief supplies. These things could happen in Japan as well if LGBT people and issues became a little more visible.

I discussed LGBT difficulties with LGBT friends and tried to imagine them in disaster situations if LGBT visibility was higher:

(1) Denied access to medical treatment

Disasters such as tsunamis destroy hospitals and transportation facilities. Transgender people on hormone therapy or post-SRS (sex reassignment surgery) treatment or gay or bisexual men with Human Immuno-Deficiency Virus/Acquired Immuno-Deficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS) could have their access to medical treatment denied when hospitals are destroyed, doctors are killed, medicine is lost or transportation facilities are demolished. Some trans-people in Tohoku go to clinics in towns other than their own because of fear that their family members, friends, colleagues or neighbors might find out about their gender identity. Losing access to medical treatment would certainly lead to the deterioration of the health of the survivors.

(2) Treated as "suspicious persons" at evacuation shelters

There are different gender-specific services and facilities in our daily lives in Japan such as washrooms, public women-only train cars in rush hour. One is likely to be seen as a “suspicious person” or denied access to services or facilities if one does not dress or behave in a gender-conforming way. One can imagine how trans-people with a non-gender-conforming look are treated as “suspicious” or denied access when they try to use temporary washrooms or public baths at evacuation shelters. It is possible that their sanitation turns poor in these situations as they may refrain from using the facilities to avoid possible unfair treatment and humiliation. They could face discrimination in accessing specific relief supplies such as underwear and sanitary goods as well.

(3) Not informed of partner’s death

In Japan, same-sex couples do not have the right to marry while heterosexual couples are legally recognized as unmarried couples or in de facto marriages. In other words, same-sex partners are total strangers under Japanese law. In heterosexual marriages or de facto marriages, people are informed whenever their spouses are killed by disasters. On the other hand, same-sex partners are not likely to be informed of their partner’s death unless their family, friends, colleagues or neighbors knew of the relationship and would kindly inform them of the sad news. Like the gay friend of mine mentioned above, there are few same-sex couples that have disclosed their relationship to others outside the LGBT community. Even if their same-sex partners were in a critical condition, no one would notify them and they would not be able to see them because they do not have visitation rights at the hospital.

(4) Unable to live with a same-sex partner in temporary housing

People basically live in temporary housing on a household basis. But same-sex partners have no legal recognition as a “couple” or “family” and would not be allowed to live together in the same temporary housing even if they had been together for a few decades. Even outside of a disaster situation, same-sex couples do not usually qualify to live in public housing because most of the municipal governments that decide who are eligible limit contract candidates to “relatives” or “household” that Japanese laws and regulations define.

(5) Refraining from using counseling service

In response to the mental health needs of women in disasters, the Gender Equality Bureau, under the Cabinet Office, launched face-to-face counseling and hotline services for women survivors, in partnership with local women’s centers. But LGBT people worry about the counselors in these services. Would they listen to LGBT clients without judgment? Would they be LGBT- sensitive? They worry because they often see LGBT people and topics about them being mocked in the media or in every-day life. It is hard for them to believe that counseling or hotline services could be LGBT-sensitive. They tend not to access the services even though they need them because they cannot trust them.

Beyond Invisibility

“We’ve been receiving many calls from women after the disaster, but none of them were from lesbian, bisexual women or trans-people. They must have called us, but they didn’t tell us so. I feel that LBT women are forced to stay quiet,” - a feminist friend of mine who has been supporting women survivors through the women’s hotline told me. After almost eighteen months since the once-in-a-millennium disaster hit Japan, the everyday lives of LGBT people in smaller towns in northeastern Japan have not changed much. As she described, they still live in invisibility, marginalization, silent prejudice and stigmatization. The Tohoku disaster revealed this reality.

Without sounding too optimistic, more inclusive laws and policies such as the Basic Law for Reconstruction from the Great East Japan Disaster, [5] the Basic Plan for Disaster Prevention, [6] and the Proposal for Reconstruction [7] have come out after the disaster, that LGBT groups and allies can utilize for a more inclusive post-disaster community. The number is still small, but more people in civil society organizations and policy makers are keen to incorporate LGBT voices, perspectives and issues in their policies and activities. Now is high time for LGBT people to lobby the government to raise awareness about them and related issues and break their invisibility. That may sound too simple and vague, but the LGBT difficulties in disasters as experienced in the Tohoku disaster are likely to be repeated in other parts of Japan and elsewhere outside the country in future disasters. We learned that difficulties in everyday life are enhanced in disaster situations. If the community faced inequality in everyday life, it would face greater inequality during a disaster. If the community faced invisibility in everyday life, there would only be silence surrounding them. We, or I at least, do not want this to be repeated anywhere. Living in invisibility, marginalization, silent prejudice and stigmatization deprives LGBTs of their dignity.

Among the 20,000 lives lost on 11 March 2011 and some 343,000 survivors [8] nationwide, there must be LGBT people whose voices were never heard. In order to not waste their lives, we must learn from LGBT experiences in northeastern Japan and start working with different possible allies for an inclusive society, and prepare for the next disaster we never know when and where will happen.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] 5,869 people died while 2,847 are missing as of 29 August 2012 according to the National Police Agency. See www.npa.go.jp/.

[2] On issues regarding gender equality during the disaster, please visit <http://risetogetherjp.org/>.

[3] Transgender people who would like their gender identity indicated in the family registry have to meet specific discriminatory conditions under the law for people with Gender Identity Disorder (GID). These conditions form barriers that prevent people from changing their documented gender identity and must be combated by providing appropriate health services, access to

information and the guarantee of the right to identity expression.

[4] Transgender is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity, expression or behavior is different from that typically associated with their assigned sex at birth, including but not limited to transsexuals, travestis, transvestites, transgenderists, cross-dressers, and gender non-conforming people. Transgender people (or trans-people) may be heterosexual, lesbian, gay or bisexual.

[5] Refer to Article 2(2) of the Basic Law for Reconstruction from Great East Japan Disaster (Law No. 76 of 24 June 2011.) It says that “opinions of diverse citizens including women, children, people with disabilities and others must be reflected” in the reconstruction work.

[6] Refer to Chapter 3, Part 1 of the Basic Plan on Disaster reduction. It says “Enhancement of women’s participation in policy making regarding disaster and actual field of disaster reduction and establishment of disaster reduction system with gender equality perspectives are necessary in order to improve disaster reduction skills in local community by implementing disaster reduction measures with diverse perspectives of people in local communities.”

[7] The Reconstruction Design Council in response to the Great East Japan Earthquake says “In an attempt to reconstruction, attention to those who have difficulty to make their voices heard must be paid in order to establish inclusive society where nobody is excluded” in its proposal “Hope in Misery.” (p. 34 of the proposal by the Reconstruction Design Council in response to the Great East Japan Earthquake on 25 June, 2011. See www.cas.go.jp/jp/fukukou/pdf/kousou12/teigen.pdf)

[8] According to the Reconstruction Agency as of 8 August 2012.