

Cast out and unwelcome: Life for transgender people after Nepal's earthquake

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After the Nepal earthquake, a cluster of tents was quickly put up in a patch of land among the winding streets of Kathmandu's Sunder Mar neighbourhood.

The people staying there have little in the way of comfort, but the site has one precious feature: there are no buildings looming overhead.

In this city, each aftershock threatens to send rubble flying to the ground. Could you sleep knowing bricks and beams might rain down at any moment?

Inside one of the tents Manisha Dhakal is bending forward, shaking her jet-black hair and slowly putting it up in a loose chignon.

As she adjusts the thick bun of hair, friends and colleagues from the Blue Diamond Society lie around in the makeshift shelter on blankets and pillows.

The society supports and campaigns for Nepalis who are gay, bisexual, lesbian, intersex (LGBTI).

The survivors in the tents – who have been given vital help by the Red Cross – check their mobile phones, thread their eye-brows and nap in the heat.

Suddenly a gust of wind hits the canvas. The sharp slapping noise makes everyone jolt straight up.

“It has been like this since the first earthquake happened, you get over-sensitive to sounds,” says Manisha, as she presses her right hand to her chest.

Transgender Nepalis have grown up risking exclusion from society and, sometimes, their own families.

Last month's earthquake brought new problems – even finding a safe place to shelter was more difficult for them and other sexual minorities.

Funerals and Facebook posts

As the director of the Blue Diamond Society, Manisha's mission is to improve the sexual health, human rights and wellbeing of sexual and gender minorities in Nepal.

The society is helping 350,000 people throughout the country. Its members jumped into action after the earthquake, with a frenzy of phone calls and social media posts making sure that people were safe.

But not everyone had survived. It took five days for rescuers to find the body of Citala, buried under the rubble of a teaching hospital. The society arranged a proper funeral.

“It was right at the last minute,” says Manishal. “The security forces were ready to do a mass funeral of unidentified bodies.”

Red Cross helps people “fending for themselves”

In January, Nepal’s government hit the headlines when it announced citizens could identify as a third gender on their passports. This status represents people who do not identify as male or female.

But in the temporary camps set up across Kathmandu for earthquake survivors, facilities are segregated into male and female – excluding third gender people. They can even struggle to access toilets.

In the aftermath of the earthquake, many third gender and LGBTI people slept under a Blue Diamond Society banner for security and identification.

The Red Cross came to their aid with tarpaulins, blankets and oral dehydration sachets – these can be lifesaving for people with serious illnesses.

Tara Bhattarai is the head of the Nepal Red Cross Society’s gender and inclusion department.

She explains: “It’s our duty to support this vulnerable group. Many transgender people don’t get help from their families and are left to fend for themselves, even in times like this.”

Under Tara’s guidance, the Red Cross is working more closely with the Blue Diamond Society. In fact, the Red Cross is now raising awareness of minority groups among its staff and volunteers across the country.

Cracked walls disrupt HIV care

In the kitchen of the Blue Diamond Society support and hospice centre, a pressure cooker filled with lentils is put on to boil for today’s lunch.

The floor and a wooden bench serve as eating area, and on a side table, small portions of cucumber and red onions are prepared to go with the main dish.

On the second floor, the beds for HIV patients are still made up and the rooms are meticulously clean. But no one dares to stay there – the three-storey building is lined with cracks.

This weekend, the society should have been busy preparing for the international day against homophobia and transphobia – a chance to focus on the rights of the LGBTI people. But with the country shattered, events and celebrations in Nepal have been cancelled.

Instead, society founder Sunil Babu Pant thanked its partners and local police and medical teams for coming to the aid of LGBTI people after the disaster.

“What Nepal is going through is beyond imagination. But we, the LGBTI people of Nepal, pledge with all Nepalese, that we will rebuild our lives, our families, our societies and our nation,” he said.

Help must reach the most vulnerable

Yet for this rebuilding to happen, help must reach those in Nepal who need it most. Millions of people still urgently need basics such as shelter, food and medicine.

Jessica Letch is a gender and protection advisor for the million Red Cross emergency earthquake

operation in Nepal.

She was on the ground within days of the disaster and is determined that help will reach the most vulnerable – including women, children, people with disabilities and LGBTI people.

She says: “The Red Cross wants to respond to the diverse needs that exist within society, and avoid a one-size-fits-all approach.”

“It takes a little bit of a change in thinking, and the Red Cross wants to be part of that change.”

Maude Froberg, Kathmandu

P.S.

* PinkNews. 25th May 2015, 5:37 PM. LAST UPDATED AT 7:21 PM:

<http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2015/05/25/cast-out-and-unwelcome-life-for-transgender-people-after-nepals-earthquake/>

* Maude Froberg is regional communications manager for the IFRC. Photos: Paula Bronstein (photos not reproduced here).