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**Segregation, Exclusion and LGBT People in Disaster Impacted Areas:
Experiences from the *Higashinihon Dai-Shinsai* (Great East-Japan Disaster)**

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ABSTRACT

The Great East-Japan Disaster, which began with the earthquake and tsunami of March 2011, prompted discussions throughout the Japanese lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community on the vulnerabilities that LGBT people face during disaster because of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. This short essay shares some of the post-disaster experiences, challenges and discussions of the LGBT community in Japan. Reports coming out of the LGBT community have stressed that pre-disaster discrimination and fears of discrimination and repression among LGBT people have hampered their recovery. There is a real fear of being discriminated against and having their family and friends discriminated against. This situation has led to the isolation and vulnerability of LGBT individuals. Despite the majority being reluctant to come out publically, the disaster forced numerous individuals to reveal their gender identity, particularly when confronted with life in shelters, the lack of supply of medication and so on. In turn, this has resulted in instances of discrimination and bullying. These accounts reveal that the main aims of disaster policies and disaster ethics – based on addressing the greatest good of the majority – largely fail to cater for LGBT people, who are not only victims of the disaster but can also be valuable contributors in the Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) process.

Keywords: vulnerability; inequalities; disaster management; LGBT; Great East Japan Disaster; social exclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Everyone covers. To cover is to tone down as a disfavoured identity to fit into the mainstream. In our increasingly diverse society, all of us are outside the mainstream in some way. Nevertheless, being deemed mainstream is still often a necessity of social life (Yoshino, 2006: ix).

Among the many different identities of social minorities in Japan, those nonconforming in terms of dominant sexual orientation and gender identity remain some of the most disadvantaged. While Japan does not outlaw consensual same-sex relationships or transgenderism, the situation faced by LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) people in Japan has been characterized by invisibility, marginalization, prejudice and stigmatization. Japan's Constitution guarantees fundamental human rights and prohibits discrimination on the basis of 'race, sex, social status or family origin,' yet substantive equality is not guaranteed to LGBT people. Japanese laws also do not protect them from discrimination. The government included 'people in a difficult situation because of sexual orientation or living with Gender Identity Disorder' in the latest Basic Plan for Gender Equality and 'sexual minorities' and in the latest Suicide Prevention Measures; it has also provided financial assistance to the development of the Yorisoi hotline (meaning 'being close by') for LGBT persons. Despite these steps, LGBT perspectives, issues and voices have not been adequately reflected in laws, government policies or even the work of civil society organizations. This invisibility and marginalization became more obvious in the 2011 *HigashinohonDai-Shinsai* (Great East Japan) Disaster.

On March 11th 2011, Japan and the rest of the world were discovering simultaneously the horror of a magnitude 9.0 earthquake rapidly followed by a series of waves of water and debris that swept the (Northeast) region and the surrounding regions of Japan as far afield as Hokkaido and the Northern Coast of the Kanto Region. This was the first mega-thrust earthquake of human memory along the Eastern Coast of Japan, and it was followed by strong aftershocks, which, combined with the tsunami, completely overcame the disaster risk management measures in place. Coastal countermeasures in the series of bays to the North of the Sendai plain as well as the disaster management measures at Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant all failed, and the disaster was upscaled from a regional to a global disaster. In Japanese, this disaster is also known as the *Tohoku Chiho Taiheiyoeki Jishin* ('Off the Pacific Coast Earthquake'). It led to 19,418 deaths, 2,592 missing, 6,220 injured, 400,305 houses destroyed as of March 1st 2016 with 50,989 still internally displaced as of February 12th 2016 (Fire and Disaster Management Agency, 2011). Because 60% of the population was 65 years old and above, numerous casualties occurred in the stairwells and because of reduced mobility. The majority of the English-language research coming out of this disaster has overwhelmingly focused on the easy-to-access knowledge of the non-social: primarily the physics and the mechanisms of the hazards in the disaster, as well as (already understood) erosion and deposition processes (Gaillard and Gomez, 2015). Although essential, most foreigners had little access to important cultural and political aspects, clouding some deeper social issues and eventually leading to gross-misrepresentations (Gomez and Hart, 2013). With this in mind, we attempt to bring the particular experiences of LGBT survivors of this disaster into the English language literature.

The experiences of LGBT survivors of the Great East Japan Disaster are not only somewhat invisible in the English language literature: LGBT people in Japan may face isolation and invisibility on a daily basis. While Japan does not criminalise transgenderism or consensual same-sex acts, there is

no anti-discrimination law inclusive of gender identity or sexual orientation, and no same-sex partnership recognition at a national level. Transgender people are entitled to change their gender, but only with certain conditions including a diagnosis of 'Gender Identity Disorder' and sterilisation. This lack of legal protection and recognition is evidence that the majority in Japan has paid little or limited attention to LGBT people and their issues. The lack of formal recognition has contributed to prejudice and discrimination against LGBT people, further contributing to their isolation and invisibility in Japanese society (Yoshino, 2006).

In other parts of the world, telling the stories of LGBT people involved in disasters, and analysing the specific effects of these disasters on LGBT people has already begun. Dominey-Hawes, Gorman-Murray and McKinnon among others have started to chip away at the issue, with research into the 2011 Queensland Floods (Gorman-Murray et al. 2016) and the 2010-2011 Christchurch earthquakes (Gorman-Murray, McKinnon and Dominey-Howes 2014), and also more generally (Dominey-Howes, Gorman-Murray and McKinnon 2014). With regards to the Merapi Volcano research in Indonesia, the Philippines, and the Indian Ocean 2004 tsunami, they write:

By identifying the negative impacts current policies have had on LGBTI populations and highlighting the role of sexual and gender identities in the ways in which natural disasters are experienced, these studies point towards the importance of queering scholarship and policy in the field (Dominey-Hawes, et al., 2014, 910).

We should not, however, confine LGBT people to the role of victim, but emphasise their positive contributions as a force for recovery. Minorities are often reduced to a victimised group, but they can of course also contribute towards disaster risk reduction and the resilience of the community, like the *warias* at Merapi Volcano, Indonesia (Balgos et al., 2014):

Yuni Shara, a *waria*, narrated that, although they wanted to give money, it was something they did not have. As a result, they decided to do what they know best – providing haircuts and make-up services to the people in evacuation centres (Balgos et al., 2014, 341).

This account shows that – at least in Indonesia – gender minorities, such as *warias*, are ready and willing to play an active role in disaster recovery, and that their non-integration in larger plans is a mistake from both discrimination and disaster recovery perspectives.

In this article, we extend this work into the Great East Japan Disaster, beginning to address invisibility through the telling of stories, stories of both vulnerability and contribution. We have found hope in feminist practices of sharing stories of lived experience (Casey 2003, Dombroski 2011), queer-theory practices of weak theory and thick description (Dombroski 2016, Sedgwick 1994, Gibson-Graham 2006), and most importantly, a *tōjisha* approach of speaking out stories and hearing the voices of the 'people concerned' (McLelland, 2009; Ofuji, 2007).

In this article, we draw on the significant experiences of Azusa Yamashita, in her role as a founder and organizer of Iwate Rainbow Network. Through her work, Yamashita has had opportunity to hear the stories and experiences of LGBT people in the period following the devastating earthquakes and tsunami of 2011. Through the Iwate Rainbow Network, she has also

organized a series of workshops where LGBT survivors of the Great East Japan Disaster, alongside LGBT individuals who were not directly affected by the disaster but lived in Iwate at the time of the disaster, discussed actual and potential difficulties and needs of LGBT disaster survivors. These workshops ran from September 2014 to February 2016 with funding by the Fujieda Mioko Foundation for Gender Equality. The workshops took place in Morioka, Miyako and Rikuzentakata in Iwate Prefecture. Much of what Yamashita has written here about the disasters comes from her experiences running these workshops.¹

In what follows, we first address some of the issues of the enforced invisibility of LGBT people in Japan and in the 2011 disaster particularly, then move on to discuss the equally difficult enforced 'coming out' that occurred during the disaster, the experiences of discrimination in the recovery process, then conclude with some comments and ongoing issues for consideration.

INVISIBILITY OF LGBT PEOPLE IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE 2011 DISASTER

In Japan, even if 'coming out of the closet' has recently become more accepted in many urban settings and in the *geinoukai* (the world of celebrities), the reality of countryside Japan is much more conservative. Even the term *inaka* (countryside) has a connotation of conservatism – as it does in many countries. In the tsunami-battered rural Tohoku (Northeast) area, LGBT people have therefore been more likely to hide their sexuality and gender identity, and this behaviour has been evidenced by the very few calls for help from LGBT people in the aftermath of the disaster. In October 2011, the Social Inclusion Support Centre established the Yoriso Hotline: a 24-hour-365-day telephone consultation service aimed at supporting the survivors of the Great East-Japan Disaster. The hotline was initially limited to callers in three disaster-affected prefectures in the Tohoku region (namely Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima), but expanded as a nationwide service with fiscal support from the government in March 2012. When callers dialled a toll free number, a voice message offered five different numbers for those with specific needs arising from social exclusion. Those who suffered difficulties stemming from sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression were asked to dial 4 and were then connected to the appropriate centre. From the 10,878,227 calls made to the Yoriso Hotline from 1 April 2012 to 31 March 2013, only 3.6% pressed the option 4 (Social Inclusiveness Support Center, 2012, 5). Considering the wide area hit by the disaster, the massive damages, and the estimated 5-10% of people in Japan who could identify as LGBT (Dentsu, 2012, cited in Kasai, 2016), considering also the significant needs of the sexual minority population (Iwate Rainbow Network, 2013), it seems that the number of documented cases involving LGBT disaster survivors is considerably smaller than would be expected (Iwate Rainbow Network, 2013; Osawa and Steel, 2013).

The choice made by many LGBT people to not come out, both before and after the disaster, is certainly related to the discrimination and persecution they face, further pushing them in to invisibility. In email correspondences with the Iwate Rainbow Network, the first LGBT group in Iwate Prefecture, one gay individual revealed that he did not encounter any specific difficulties as a gay survivor because he 'had not disclosed his sexuality or his relationship with his same-sex partner to anyone' in his town.

LGBT people in Japan still fear the consequences of disclosing their sexuality such as rejection by family and friends, losing a job or housing, and exclusion and isolation from community.

In order to avoid such consequences, many LGBT Japanese may try to 'pass' as heterosexual within their home communities and have practically no option but to hide their sexual orientation and gender identity. In fact, online research targeting gay and bisexual men revealed that 80% of the respondents were not out to their parents about their sexual orientation and that 60% of them had not come out to anyone (Hidaka and Shimane, 2012). Another piece of research conducted by the hotline shows that only 22.5% of people of sexual minorities have experiences of coming out to someone (Social Inclusion Centre, 2012). When a Tokyo-based LGBT group sent a letter to the government requesting LGBT-sensitive disaster responses and support to the six survivors six days after the disaster (<http://wan.or.jp/reading/?p=2195>), some of the LGBT people in the Tohoku region reported that they were afraid that the letter somehow could have outed them (Ozawa, 2011).

DISASTERS AS FORCED COMING OUT

Although numerous LGBT people may have chosen not to come out, disasters are notorious for stripping individuals bare to the rest of the community, and the Great East-Japan Disaster was no different, during both the event and in the recovery phase. In the context of Hurricane Katrina disaster in the US, for instance:

Katrina eradicated much individual agency when the hurricane concretized 'the closet' and indiscriminately put on display for others – not only strangers, such as rescue workers, news crews, insurance inspectors, contractors and curious tourists, but also family members and neighbours – thousands of individual caches of pornography, sex toys and other sexual accoutrements that had not been taken with evacuees [...] these exposed elements of private lives may be in hindsight, these uncontrolled 'outings' of a range of sexualities and sexual practices added to the anxieties of persons, gay and otherwise, who evacuated and returned to the city (Richards, 2010: 523-524).

This process of forced coming out is not only related to private places that became open for the world to see, but can also be a process that leaves human-beings bare, viscerally open, for everybody to see, appraise, judge. With regards to the Great East-Japan Disaster, Umemiya (2012) interviewed a trans-man survivor who spent some time at a refuge in Fukushima because his house was damaged by the earthquake (Umemiya, 2012). Because the survivor had not gone through sex reassignment surgery, he was wearing a chest compression shirt at the time of evacuation and had to wear the same shirt for several days with no water or laundry facility, resulting in anxiety about his body odour, and how it could impact the perception of his gender. Despite his efforts to manage his gender expression, the perception of his gender varied from one individual to another. Some saw him as a man while others saw him as a woman. He mentioned that he was 'glad to be called "*onisan* (young man, or big brother)" by an old woman, who spent time next to him at the shelter, but at other occasions he was most affected when a city official was calling him 'X's daughter' (Umemiya, 2012).

Because most of the LGBT people in the area affected by the disaster were living in hiding before the disaster, their coming-out was often forced, painful, and by comparison certainly

more difficult than in New Orleans, where the presence of LGBT communities is well-known and probably more accepted. These forced 'coming outs' have then fuelled the outcome feared by the LGBT people: segregation, bullying, and so on. But not always completely: Uchida (2012) has documented a case of a transgender female survivor who spent some time at a refuge. She came out to other women evacuees at the refuge and was accepted as a woman. A women's dressing room and bathroom were made accessible to her and she led her life at the refuge as a woman, and women survivors close to her defended her when a group of male survivors at the refuge made discriminatory remarks against her because of her gender identity (Uchida, 2012).

DISCRIMINATION DURING THE RECOVERY PROCESS

The widely accepted ethics of disaster recovery is usually based on a simple principle: save as many as you can, or in other words, 'save the majority' (Zack, 2009). This approach to ethics does not address the problem of minorities satisfactorily. Zack summarises the three distinct moral systems traditionally supported by philosophers (who then use 'common sense' moral intuitions to criticise each one). These are consequentialism, deontology and virtue ethics. Zack explains:

Consequentialism entails that good results are the most important moral factor. Deontology, or duty ethics, requires that we always follow certain moral principles, regardless of the results.

Virtue ethics is the moral system based on the virtues, or good character, of individuals. (Zack, 2009:33).

The very base of all these three ethical approaches works to handicap minorities, and in the present case, LGBT people. This issue has been evidenced in the different symposiums and workshops that Yamashita was involved in around the country at LGBT-friendly civil societies.

In one workshop, prominent Tohoku-based LGBT rights activists reported that transgender people on hormone therapy or post-SRS treatment, and gay or bisexual men with HIV/AIDS sometimes lost access to their necessary medical treatment, as the disaster destroyed hospitals and transportation facilities.² Going – when possible – to other medical centres also generated fears of having their gender and sexual orientation discovered by acquaintances and family members. In shelters, the division between male and female for several facilities (including washrooms, public baths, and so on) put LGBT people in a difficult position and it certainly affected the health of several people who were refraining to use the facilities in order to avoid humiliation.

Participants also noted that the discrimination has not stopped with the gender identity of LGBT people, but also comprises their private relations. In Japan, same-sex couples do not have the right to marry, while heterosexual couples can be legally recognized as couples or in *de facto* relationships. In other words, same-sex partners are absolutely unrelated under Japanese law. In heterosexual marriages or *de facto* marriages, people are informed whenever their spouses are killed by disasters, but this is not required to happen for same-sex partners, who are not likely to be informed of their partners' death unless their family, friends, colleagues or neighbors knew of the same-sex relationship and would kindly inform them. Similar issues also exist for hospital visits, where same-sex partners can be refused the right to visit or be consulted for medical decisions.

Same sex couples have also been institutionally denied access to temporary housing. Survivors have been given access to temporary housing on a household basis. But same-sex partners

having no legal recognition as a 'couple' or 'family' were not allowed to live together in the same temporary housing. This problem is unfortunately only the mirror of the non-disaster situation in Japan, where same-sex couples do not qualify to live in public housing because of the definition of 'household' or 'relatives' that most of the municipal governments use. Although such a case of denial has not been documented in the Great East Japan Disaster, same-sex couples reported they would have to live in public housing separately or find a privately-owned apartment where they could live together.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The Great East-Japan Disaster – and our practices of story-telling around it – revealed various inequalities that exist in Japanese society, and the need for more inclusive legislation and policies. The Basic Law for Reconstruction from the Great East Japan Disaster (2011) and The Basic Plan on Disaster Prevention (Cabinet Office, 2013) have shown some positive progress in this direction. Article 2 of the Basic Law says 'opinions of diverse citizens including women, children, people with disabilities and others must be reflected' in the reconstruction work. The Basic Plan stands on the same perspective and reads 'youth, the elderly, people with disabilities and women should participate more in community development. Especially, the gender-equality perspective should not be overlooked...' (Cabinet Office, 2013). Establishing new connections among people and new developments in Japanese society are the subject of another government resolution titled 'Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women in Natural Disasters', adopted at the 56th session of the Commission on the Status of Women in March 2012. Although it mainly focuses on women and does not specifically mention LGBT people or issues, it intends to 'promote more gender-sensitive disaster risk management' (http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/announce/2012/3/0310_01.html), and relates also to the needs of gender and sexual minorities in disaster context.

While the Great East-Japan Disaster may have disclosed the reality of discrimination and the profound invisibility of LGBT people in the Tohoku region, it has also brought an opportunity for gender and sexual minority communities in Japan and LGBT-sensitive women's and civil society organizations working in the field of reconstruction. These organisations may now be more aware of the specific needs of LGBT people in times of disaster and prepare for disasters that Japan may face in the future. Women's organizations working in this field, especially, have started collaborating with LGBT groups and incorporating LGBT perspectives in their work after March 2011. Gender and sexual minority communities in Japan have started discussions, as illustrated in the workshops reported on here, but indeed, concrete advocacy and preparation for future disasters are yet to be done. That should – and will – be the next step.

The role of feminist and *tojisha* storytelling methods have a key role to play in informing and performing changes in Japanese society in the area of disaster risk management and LGBT experiences. In this article we have collected stories from LGBT survivors of the Higashinihon Dai Shinsai (Great East Japan Disaster) that highlight simultaneously the general invisibility of LGBT people in Japanese disaster management plans alongside the enforced visibility of LGBT people in disaster impacted areas. Our experiential storytelling mode provides diverse accounts of the ways in which disasters can unevenly impact minority groups in disaster management plans that prioritise the good of the majority. Through these diverse accounts, we might begin to question and to queer disaster management with the wellbeing of all in mind, while informing future planning and advocacy.

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Notes

1. The role of the other two co-authors is as follows. Chris Gomez has positioned the stories within the context of disaster research, and used his facility with the Japanese language to support story-telling. Kelly Dombroski has positioned the stories within feminist and queer theory, and managed the re-writing and editing process.
2. Kohama and Masaki pointed out at the symposium *Disaster and support for sexual minorities* held on March 17th 2013 in Miyagi, Sendai. Yamashita was one of the speakers at the symposium, invited to share experiences in Iwate.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Azusa Yamashita is a member of the LGBT community and the director of the Rainbow Network of Iwate. She has been engaged in the recovery process post-2011 disaster in Japan and done a lot of work on the ground with and for the LGBT community in the post-2011 disaster area.

Kelly Dombroski is a lecturer in human geography, teaching development studies and feminist economic geographies. Her research work is based on empirical work with mothers in China, Australia and New Zealand, using post-structural, feminist and queer theory approaches to studying care and social change. She is a member of the Community Economies Collective, see www.communityeconomies.org.

Christopher Gomez is a specialist of natural hazards and disasters in Japan with a comfortable command of the Japanese language and their uses and customs. Although his main research area is on hazards and disaster risk, he has used a broad training spanning from Earth Sciences to Philosophy to look at problems from plural perspectives.