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Hardships: LGBT+ Community in Japan

Introduction

In every nook and corner around this planet that we call home, there is diversity, uniqueness, and a rainbow of people, one example of this is the LGBT+ community. This community's abbreviation is short for, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, a term that was adopted in the late 1980's used to represent this diverse community. This umbrella term shows the diversity of sexuality and gender identity, and it has since grown from the initial four to be more inclusive and be able to describe those who are non-heterosexual and non-cisgender. Around the world, many countries have, slowly but surely, accepted this community, decriminalizing it and having a more positive relationship between the community and their respective country. As some would say nowadays, grow up, this should not be an issue. By saying or wording it like this, it would bring some light to the fact that things are becoming more acceptable nowadays. Just because something is more acceptable, LGBT+ community more specifically, it does not mean that everything is fine and equal.

Japan, Land of the Rising Sun, is a country that is not left out of having their fair share of having a LGBT+ community. Japan's LGBT+ community is so diverse that it has been able to reach international media, such as Gia Gunn, a Japanese-American transgender woman, famous for being on RuPaul's Drag Race, and Endigo, the first Japan-based drag queen to participate in Drag Race Sweden. Internationally, Japan is known for being innovative and accepting towards

the LGBT+ community; however, the nation grapples with persistent issues surrounding the LGBT+ community. Over the years, LGBT+ discrimination and disadvantages in Japan has gained attention in recent years, even though Japan has moved in a more progressive direction when dealing with these issues and challenges. Despite this, it still seems like these issues are pushed to the sidelines. Japan still has a significant amount of LGBT+ issues that need to be addressed and need a solution.

Early LGBT+ history in Japan

Just like any other country, Japan has its own LGBT+ history, there is a long and interesting history relating to the LGBT+ community and culture, dating back to pre-modern time, going as far back as the Edo period. During this period, with Japan's first religion, Shintoism, it set the basis for a tolerance towards people of all sexualities. During the same time period, *Shudo*, *wakashudo*, and *nanshoku* were three forms of same-sex practices in Japan. Gregory M. Pflugfelder, author of *Cartographies of Desire: Male-male Sexuality in Japanese Discourse, 1600-1950* provides an explanation that these terms do come from a religious background; however, he explains that it was less likely associated with religious teaching. Pflugfelder goes on to state that terms like *nanshoku* was used more in same-sex related topics, "During the Edo period, *nanshoku* appears in popular writings as one of the two most widely used expressions for male-male eroticism, featuring prominently in the titles of many works that, far from warning of its dangers, extolled its pursuit" (Pflugfelder, 26). Homosexuality had its place in Japan's history, this was commended. Same-sex terms and interest slowly continued to spread especially during the Meiji and Taishō period. The Meiji period saw Japanese intelligence travel and borrow from western countries, resulting in a spread of *seiyoku* in novels and writings.

The Taishō period was when Japan experienced a “*hentai boom*”, an explosive interest in queer *seiyoku*, and a spark in interest with female-female same-sex relationship and romance.

LGBT+ History During and After WWII

During pre and postwar times, Japan’s ideology during these periods was more centered around heterosexuality and pronatal; however, Japanese sociality actually shows something more along the lines of homosocial, mostly around Japanese men. Due to Japan’s severe censorship exercised, this homosocial military brotherhood was seen by the media more as “love between comrades” (*sen’ yūai*). Mark McLelland, author of the chapter “Japan’s queer culture” in the book *Routledge Handbook of Japanese Culture and Society*, goes on to mention that this brotherly love between comrades sometimes had sexual and homosexual elements. McLelland does on to give an example by stating:

One article, dating from 1952 and entitled ‘Homosexuality on the battlefield,’ points out the ‘veteran officers choose for their orderlies soldiers who are beautiful youths (*bishōnen*)’ and that these boys were used as a ‘substitute for women’ and an ‘outlet for sexual desire’ (*seiyoku no hakeguchi*) on the front line (McLelland, 142).

It was not until after the war that the new sexual and LGBT+ culture started to arise. Following this immediate postwar period, traditional sex and gender ideology that Japan used to have were loosened up, resulting in a Japanese society that was less judgemental towards homosexuality and one that had more “curiosity seeking” (*ryōki*).

As the decades passed, LGBT+ elements would appear more in Japanese society and media. Japanese LGBT+ people, like cross-dressing male prostitutes (*danshō*), homosexuals (*homo*), and/or female homosexuals (*josei no homo*) would write to magazines about their

practices and sexual experiences. From the early 1970's Japan and onwards, LGBT+ activism began to sprout in Japanese society, beginning with the women's liberation movement, in which there was a rise in lesbian (*rezubian*) identity. In later years and decades, Japan would see LGBT+ organizations form to fight for their community, their first gay and transgender activists, first ever pride parade, and even have their first openly gay politician. The LGBT+ community and culture has always been part of Japan.

The Issue

It is a great relief for many LGBT+ members in Japan to hear that Japan is a country that tolerates the LGBT+ community. However, just tolerating something does not mean that all issues have been solved. Despite these historical advancements, Japan still has a long way to go. The LGBT+ has existed for years in Japan, and has always been seen as a marginalized group, it is obvious that they will be confronted with many social issues. Claire Maree provides information in her work about LGBT+ related issues in Japan by stating:

While this is launched as a “new” social concern, community networking around such issues stretches back to at least the women's organizations and gay subcultures of the 1970s, and work at the community level on raising awareness of issues to do with partnership rights in Japan has been ongoing since at least the 1990s (Maree, 3).

For a country that has LGBT+ history and issues, dating back since the Edo period, why are they now only seeing this as a “new” social concern. Japan having a concern with the issues that the LGBT+ community are facing is a step forward in progress, but it is not enough because many of the LGBT+ members are still facing many hardships to this day, even as simple as coming out.

Coming Out in Japan

For many LGBT+ individuals, coming out to their parents could be their starting point, as well as being a milestone for their LGBT identity. As seen in many Western societies, a LGBT+ individual coming out to their parents is very common; however it can be rare in non-Western societies like Japan. With current social climate, Japanese LGBT+ individual have difficult times with something as simple as coming out. Japan has relatively few openly-queer individuals, this may be because of the discrimination, discouragement, traditions, and/or lack of legal protection for LGBT+ rights at a national level. Masami Tamagawa, author of the article, “Coming Out to Parents in Japan: A Sociocultural Analysis of Lived Experiences”, provides information on the lack of Japanese LGBT+ individuals coming out, by stating:

coming out to parents is an exceptionally critical decision for Japanese LGB children for their own survival. It is difficult for Japanese LGBT children to become independent, because of the lack of legal protection for sexual minorities, Japan’s economic recession, and the strong stigma Japanese society poses on LGBT children and their parents, especially on their mothers (Tamagawa, 500).

With the lack of support, resources, and protection for the LGBT+ community in Japan, many Japanese LGBT+ individuals have no desire to come out to their parents, if rejected by their family. Since LGBT+ individuals are rarely welcomed into mainstream society, the only way for LGBT+ individuals to be “tolerated” is if they don’t come out.

Besides the lack of support and protection, there are other reasons that make it difficult for Japanese LGBT+ individuals to come out to their parents. Heteronormativity and the age gap are other factors that make it harder or impossible to come out in Japan. The heteronormative ideology has been present in contemporary Japan, especially in the ideal roles with a Japanese family, the breadwinner father, the bearing mother, and the successful child. There is pressure for

the child, especially a LGBT child, to follow the tradition and create their own lineage. In Tamagawa's other article, "Coming Out of the Closet in Japan: An Exploratory Sociological Study", she provides an example of heteronormativity affecting an LGBT+ individual from coming out by stating, "some Japanese parents require their GLBT children to lead heteronormative lives by marrying and having children, thus producing grandchildren for them" (Tamagawa, 494). The fear of being considered a failure or not being able to follow their parents' expectations cause many LGBT+ individuals to decide not to ever come out and hide their LGBT+ identity.

Discrimination

Despite the gradual progress that the country is taking, the LGBT+ community in Japan faces many hardships, discrimination and challenges. In Japan, there is a range of hardship that the LGBT+ community faces on a daily basis, like something as common as bullying and hate speech. For the Japanese citizens that are saying these harmful comments and speeches about the LGBT+ community, they will defend themselves by saying that is free speech. Luckily in 2016, Japan brought into fruition with the Hate Speech Law. However, there was an issue with this law and the LGBT+ community, they were not even protected from any hate speech. In his work, Richard Powell provides information as for why by stating, "only in 2016 could Japanese lawmakers agree on a Hate Speech Law condemning 'acts of expression' (言動活動) against people from other countries or their descendants, and this does not touch on other minorities or incorporate penalties" (Powell, 11). With no real form of protection towards the LGBT+ community, the hate will continue. LGBT+ individual of all ages will continue to experience hateful language directed towards them unless Japan, at a national level, does something about it.

Hate towards the LGBT+ community will come from anyone, will be done anywhere, and towards anyone, regardless of their age. Homophobia and transphobia will linger throughout all of Japan, even in places like high school, places in which one would think that LGBT+ minors would be somewhat safe. The hate that these LGBT+ high schoolers will face, while attending school, will come in the form of physical and verbal bullying with comments of “homo” and/or “faggot”. As a result of the verbal and physical bullying, many LGBT+ high schoolers feel ignored and/or isolated from the rest, suicidal though, or sadly some have attempted suicide. Among the LGBT+ students, the ones that have received more hate in these Japanese schools are transgender students. Author Makiko Kasai in their chapter, "Sexual and gender minorities and bullying in Japan" writes about the bullying that Japanese transgender students face by stating:

Transgender females (MtF) experienced the most severe physical and/or sexual assaults. Some bullying had happened only during the most recent school year (28%), but most students reported that bullying had been ongoing for more than 1 year (72%). Transgender males (FtM) in particular reported that they had experienced bullying for more than 5 years on average (43%) (Kasai, 191).

With their transgender identity plus the bullying that they receive from their classmates, a big percentage of them will not talk to anyone about the trans hate they are facing at school. For the trans Japanese students that do talk to someone, a small percentage of them will be blamed or will be ignored. With no support from these schools and by the nation in general, many LGBT+ students fear to express themselves and be who they are.

For LGBT+ Japanese individuals, there are harsher challenges that they face, harsher than verbal and physical bullying, especially more for transgender individuals. For a transgender

individual in Japan, felt left out, since most LGBT+ issue focused more on the LGB part. Trans individuals do not feel comfortable in society, around others, let alone in the gender they were assigned at birth. Japan took a step forward in order to help their transgender citizens. In 2004, Japan introduced the Gender Identity Disorder and Special Cases (GID) Act, which allowed transgender individuals to legally change their gender identification. This Act may seem like a huge step forward for Japan and for the Japanese trans community but in reality it is more like several steps backwards, this Act has many transphobic traits engraved into it. In her article, “Limitations, Spaces, & Possibilities: Trans Livelihoods in Contemporary Japan”, author Miriam Panahi mentions the many negative effects this Act has towards the transgender community in Japan. For the trans individual that do decide they want the change, they must accept many things that Panahi states:

The requirements coerce Japanese transgender individuals to submit to a list of invasive and permanent medical procedures to be recognized by the state (...)
Additionally, post-diagnosis individuals must undergo forced sterilization and be of unmarried status for legal gender change consideration (Panahi, 18-19).

As the article will continue to state, this Act is synonymous with struggle. For the trans individuals in Japan that do not want to go along with the Act, it is no easier for them. Many transgender individuals in Japan that do not have the surgery, may face employment discrimination, since they do not look or identify the same as their identification card. Many are pressured to accept the GID Act before finishing their education because that is the only way they will not be discriminated against or refused employment. For the transgender citizens in Japan, it seems like a lose-lose situation, either accept the surgery and the life long damages or

live with gender dysphoria and live by their untrue gender that is marked on their identification card.

Possible solution

Japan as a nation tolerates and accepts the LGBT+ community, as well as has tried to make some changes in order to support the community, but there is more that Japan can do than the bare minimum. It is known that in the span of a couple months or year, Japan will not grant full protection or pass LGBT+ supporting laws, but it does not mean that a fight for LGBT+ rights and laws can not carry on. If the process for a better Japan for the LGBT+ need to have a starting point, a good one would be fight in local authorities before heading towards a national level recognition. One issue that is always connected to the LGBT+ community is fight to same-sex marriage and spousal benefits. Yuki Arai author of the article, “Is Japan Ready to Legalize Same-Sex Marriage?” write about the current situation in Japan with the lack of support for same-sex marriage and marital benefits by stating:

Apart from the fact that same-sex couples have no means to legally prove their relationships to society, which is possible for opposite-sex couples through the legal institution of marriage, and they cannot enjoy spousal rights and benefits provided by law, such as inheritance rights and spousal deductions in taxation (Arai, 136-137).

Nineteen of Japan’s forty-seven prefectures offer a partnership system, which can be seen similar to a marital status, which also offers same-sex partners limited benefits. If more local governments and more prefectures allow LGBT+ partner to marry and have spousal benefits, the movement can reach a national level, which can led to national recognition.

In order for more acceptance of the LGBT+ community in Japanese societies, there should be an attempt to re-education the heteronormative society about LGBT+ history and culture and in general a shift in attitude. An idea that Japan could attempt, in order to re-educate, is to provide courses or teach about LGBT+ issues, injustice, history, etcetera. Sonja Pei-Fen Dale, author of , “Teaching LGBT Rights in Japan: Learning from Classroom Experiences” writes about “lack of awareness and knowledge of lgbt issues in school” (223) as well as provides method on how primary, secondary, and higher levels of education can change the ignorance of LGBT+ related topics. In their article, they mention their effective method of teaching by stating, “None of the classes were solely about lgbt issues, but I made it a point to include these issues in my classes. As such, depending on the class, lgbt issues were discussed alongside women’s rights, gender roles, ethnic minorities, and wider social issues of discrimination” (Dale, 224). Mixing LGBT+ related issues with other social issues in Japan was an effective way to teach her classrooms. They also state that having someone of the LGBT+ community is very important because without them, misinformation about the community is taught. Japan has a long history of LGBT+ history in culture, there is no need to censor it, instead it needs to teach it to the Japanese society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, from both physical and verbal bullying, societal stigmatization, to legal challenges, the LGBT+ community in Japan has encountered several hardships. Japan has made strides, taking progressive steps allowing gender reassignment surgery for transgender individuals and offering a partnership system for same-sex couples, and other legal changes. However, the fight and journey towards true inclusivity for the LGBT+ community still remains extensive. Heteronormativity has been deeply ingrained into Japan, hindering the complete

inclusion of diverse sexual orientations as well as gender identities. Japan as a nation is evolving, especially with LGBT+ related issues and concerns, efforts are being made to have a societal shift that ensures equality and respect for the LGBT+ community. The fight for the LGBT+ community in Japan has not come to an end, it will continue to strive and fight for their rights.

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