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Being LGBT in disasters: Lived experiences from Japan

Conflict, disaster, or unexpected events such as the COVID-19 pandemic unveil existing social inequalities and magnify the vulnerability of certain social groups, such as uneven access to gender-appropriate supplies and services. Japan is particularly prone to natural hazards, including earthquakes, tsunamis, typhoons, and volcanic eruptions.[1] As such, it may be one of the best places to observe political and legal responses to the resultant disasters, and the manner in which crises and vulnerabilities interact. Japan's national disaster policies started to incorporate an understanding of age-related dimensions of vulnerability in the late 1980s based on the experiences of older adults in disasters (Lee, 2006), and later a gender lens in understanding the ways in which disasters and human experiences converge (Asano, 2012). It was only after the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, however, when policymakers, academics, disaster-response NGOs, women's groups, and LGBT communities became aware of the specific vulnerability and needs that some people have in times of disaster because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression in Japan.

The experiences of LGBT survivors of the Great East Japan Earthquake have been documented widely in research by myself and other researchers (e. g., Sugiura & Maekawa, 2021; Uchida, 2012, 2015; Yamashita, 2012; Yamashita et al., 2017). In this paper, I build on this research by focusing on the lived experiences of LGBT people in three disasters that occurred after the Great East Japan Earthquake: the Kumamoto Earthquakes in 2016, flood and landslides in Hokkaido and the Tohoku region caused by a series of typhoons in 2016, and the Hokkaido Eastern Iburi Earthquake in 2018. I first examine Japan's disaster risk reduction and management (DRRM) policies from an LGBT lens, before introducing the cases of 10 LGBT survivors, whose experiences I documented in a series of semistructured interviews in 2019 and 2020.

1 In this paper, I consciously avoid the use of the term "natural disaster," as it perpetuates the perception of disasters as naturally occurring, inevitable events, while overlooking the political, socioeconomic, and environmental context in which they occur (see, e. g., Balthasar, 2023).

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110767995-008

1 The Great East Japan Disaster as an opportunity for change

Over the past few decades, Japanese society has gradually come to recognize the hurdles LGBT people face on the basis of their sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression in different spheres of their everyday life, such as at home, in school, at work, and in healthcare settings. As the only G7 country that does not legalize marriage equality or outlaw discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression at the national level, Japan remains an outlier with regard to what many Global North nations recognize to be the fundamental human rights of LGBT persons. The realities documented by researchers and the tireless activism of vocal human rights proponents have informed some policies that are more reflective and inclusive of LGBT needs. For example, the law on legal gender marker changes was established in 2003 as a result of advocacy by a group of trans people. The inclusion of gender and sexual minorities in national policies for suicide prevention and anti–school bullying, and the national gender equality plan are such examples. These important efforts have not yet had an impact, however, in crisis situations, such as those that arise in the context of disasters. LGBT experiences of disaster have long been invisible and overlooked in society, policies, and even within queer communities themselves. This is the case in other parts of the world as well (Dominey-Howes et al., 2014), and LGBT perspectives have remained scarce in documentation and policies globally (Gaillard et al., 2017).

The Great East Japan Disaster saw the largest-scale earthquake (magnitude 9.0) in the country's recorded history (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2014, p. 12), and the ensuing tsunamis and nuclear power plant explosions resulted in over 22,000 lost or missing lives (*Higashinihon daishinsai*, 2021), destroyed livelihoods, and displaced over 400,000 people (Kawata, 2011). The economic and social impacts of the disaster will continue for decades to come. Moreover, the disaster has revealed and raised awareness of the existing inequalities that vulnerable populations faced in Japanese society prior to the disasters. In documenting support work for disaster-affected women by other disaster-affected women, Asano (2012) argued that during the response to the Great East Japan Disaster, support for hitherto-neglected groups emerged, including gender and sexual minorities, as well as girls and college-aged women (p. 131).

A literature search supports Asano's point. Few articles about LGBT-specific struggles in the disaster context prior to the Great East Japan Disaster appear when searching newspaper databases and CiNii (a database of Japanese- and English-language academic articles published in Japan) by using various combinations

of relevant Japanese words. For example, with the "Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake" in 1995, I searched for "homosexuality," "lesbian," "gay," and "trans." I then searched for the same terms with the "Niigata Chūetsu Earthquake" in 2004. The 1990s was a pivotal period in the history of Japan's LGBT communities. A lesbian and gay organization filed the first case against a public authority for discrimination in 1991, and the first pride parade was held in 1994 (Fushimi, 2004, pp. 371–372). However, Japanese society was still not informed enough on LGBT issues to pay attention to LGBT people's disaster experiences. It must be acknowledged that there were LGBT people who survived disasters prior to the Great East Japan Earthquake in spite of the shortage of documentation.

By the time of the Great East Japan Disaster, certain institutional changes to respect LGBT rights were already in place, such as enabling legal changes to one's official gender (2003), the national suicide prevention policy (2012), and the memorandum on the support of gender and sexual minorities in schools by the Ministry of Education (2015). Japan's LGBT communities had benefited from a few decades of activism, and there was greater social awareness of LGBT issues. This made it possible for conversations around the experiences and needs of LGBT people in disasters to take place not only within LGBT communities, but also among DRRM stakeholders such as municipal employees, shelter volunteer groups, and neighborhood associations, who came to realize that LGBT people faced specific challenges and needs not only in times of disaster but also in everyday life. In other words, the 2011 disaster functioned as a turning point to highlight LGBT issues. Scholars in development studies have argued that disaster can function as an opportunity for some form of social transformation (Bănică et al., 2020).

Prior to the Great East Japan Earthquake, Japan's DRRM policies did not consider LGBT needs. In 2013, the Cabinet Office's Gender Equality Bureau made two explicit references to sexual minorities regarding evacuation shelter management in its publication on DRRM guidelines and building better measures from a gender equality perspective:

> To accommodate gender and sexual minorities and others, it is necessary to consider installing at least one universal restroom that both men and women can use. Outdoor universal restrooms are inaccessible for wheelchair users, so installing temporary indoor restrooms would be ideal. (p. 29)[2]

Further, it noted:

2 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Japanese in this paper are by the author.

> When creating lists [of evacuees], [the evacuees'] agreement to the disclosure of personal information must be confirmed. An abundance of caution is required in managing such information. Gender on evacuees' lists can be recorded in open-ended columns out of consideration for gender and sexual minorities. (Gender Equality Bureau, 2013, pp. 34–35)

It is noteworthy that these references were made only two years after the 2011 disaster. As there were officials from the Gender Equality Bureau and the Gender Equality Team of the Reconstruction Agency who were keen to learn about LGBT experiences and needs during the 2011 disaster, these references were clearly based on such discussions that took place in LGBT communities.

2 LGBT lived experiences after the Great East Japan Earthquake

I conducted semistructured and face-to-face interviews with 10 LGBT survivors of three disasters between February 2019 and January 2020 in order to identify the disaster vulnerability, resilience, and policy needs of LGBT people. As some of the experiences in the Great East Japan Disaster of 2011 had already been documented, my objective was to examine whether subsequent DRRM policies reflected any LGBT struggles and needs that had been highlighted for the first time in 2011. Ten interviewees were chosen because outreach to potential candidates was feasible through LGBT groups with whom I had built trust. Finding LGBT individuals who have been affected by disasters and are willing to talk about who they are and what they went through is not easy. That is why I chose three disaster-affected areas where I have a network with local LGBT groups for this research.

Interviewees were approached through local LGBT groups and given a concise explanation of the research. Before commencing each interview, I explained the objective of the interview, types of questions to be asked, how the interview data would be used, and the interview process (see appendix A) – they could skip questions they preferred not to answer and stop the interview at any time. I also briefly shared with interviewees my own experiences during the Great East Japan Earthquake and my involvement with LGBT communities. Written consent was then obtained from the interviewees, and the interviews were audio-recorded with the interviewees' permission. Sample interview questions (translated from Japanese) are included in appendix B.

The 10 interviewees consisted of two lesbian women, two bisexual women, one pansexual woman, two trans women, one trans man, and two gay men. Details of the interviewees and their interviews are shown in table 1. While potential candidates were approached without any limitations on nationality, all the interviewees

happened to be Japanese citizens living in Japan. Therefore, all the interviews were conducted in Japanese, transcribed, and later translated by the author. The interviewees were all adults, whose ages ranged in their twenties to fifties. I use the interviewees' chosen pronouns and identities, as well as their preferred vocabulary.

Table 1: Summary of interviews with LGBT survivors of disasters.

Interviewee	Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity	Experiences	Date of Interview
Kumamoto Earthquakes: Earthquakes from magnitude 5.4 to 7.3 struck Kumamoto on 14–16 April 2016, which resulted in 139 deaths, 2,581 people injured, and 181,373 houses (Fire and Disaster Management Agency, 2016).			
A	Bisexual woman	Water and electricity cut, fled to emergency shelter, and provided support to others.	17 June 2019
B	Trans woman	Housing damaged and fled to emergency shelter.	17 June 2019
C	Pansexual woman	Housing damaged and fled to parents' house with a same-gender partner and children.	18 June 2019
D	Gay man	Water and electricity cut, fled to a friend's house and an emergency shelter, and provided support to others.	17 September 2019
Flood and landslides in Hokkaido and Tohoku: Six typhoons hit Hokkaido and northeast Japan, which caused large-scale floods, 23 deaths, and 6 people missing in August 2016 (Bosai Plus, 2016).			
E	Trans woman	Neighborhood flooded, fled to a friend's house and provided support to others.	1 February 2019
Hokkaido Eastern Iburi Earthquake: A series of earthquakes from magnitude 5.2 to 6.7 (Japan Meteorological Agency, n.d.) struck in September and October 2018, which resulted in 44 deaths, 785 people injured, 49,412 houses damaged, and a large-scale blackout throughout Hokkaido (Hokkaido Government, 2022).			
F	Lesbian	Housing damaged but stayed home with a same-gender partner.	14 September 2019
G	Gay man	Electricity cut and provided support to others.	16 September 2019
H	Lesbian	Water and electricity cut, stayed home, and provided support to others.	25 January 2020

Table 1: Summary of interviews with LGBT survivors of disasters. *(Continued)*

Interviewee	Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity	Experiences	Date of Interview
J	Bisexual woman	Water and electricity cut, stayed home, and provided support to others. (H's partner)	25 January 2020
K	Trans man	Water and electricity cut, stayed home with wife, and provided shelter to his evacuating mother.	26 January 2020

3 LGBT vulnerability during a disaster

The impact of a disaster on an area differs depending on one's vulnerability, as "the characteristics of a person or group and their situation … influence their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural disaster" (Wisner, 2003, p. 11). Just as social dimensions of difference such as ethnicity, age, or disability can render one vulnerable, one's actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or expression can add to one's vulnerability in disaster settings (Brown et al., 2019). The 10 interviews illustrate the vulnerability and stresses that LGBT people are forced to deal with because of the lack of legal rights and social recognition of LGBT issues in times of disaster. They point to specific challenges faced by LGBT people in times of disasters such as evacuees' lists, restrooms and baths, privacy, housing, medication, inclusion/exclusion, and intersectionality, as described below. These challenges should be seen as a continuation of hurdles faced in daily life. For instance, trans people would feel safer using a restroom in accord with their gender identity and expression at an evacuation shelter if they were already able to do so in schools, at work, and in other public spaces in daily life. Same-gender couples would not hesitate to evacuate to a shelter and would not have to hide their relationship if it were legally recognized and widely accepted in society.[3]

3 "Same-sex" tends to reproduce the image of one's sex as being both static and binary. It does not take into account the many nonbinary and trans identities possible in human relationships that may be "read" by others as same-gender relationships but might be, for example, a trans woman and a cis woman. That is why I have chosen to use "same-gender" here, rather than the more commonly used term "same-sex."

3.1 Evacuee lists

When a disaster strikes, emergency shelters are set up by local governments based on Article 49(7) of the Basic Act on Disaster Management. Every shelter has a list of evacuees in advance or creates one when the shelter is set up in order to gather basic information about the evacuees so that the shelter managers can arrange necessary supplies for them, such as food, water, blankets, and clothes, and respond to their specific needs, including the needs of older adults and families with small children. The list usually contains one's name, address, phone number, age, and gender.

Two of the interviewees (B and H) indicated that the evacuees' lists could be a problem for some trans evacuees, at least in their current form. Interviewee B, a trans woman whose legal gender marker says otherwise, fled from her home after earthquakes caused her windows to be broken and electricity to be cut in the middle of the night. She first fled to an open area by car and spent a few days there. She recalled her problems when she and other evacuees were asked to move to a local public center for farmers:

> The list of people [in my village] was already there to check every evacuee. Someone who was probably from a neighborhood association told me that how I dressed looked like a woman but couldn't confirm I was the man [in the list].... They told me they wouldn't be able to guarantee my safety when larger earthquakes occurred during the blackout because of this mismatch [between my birth name on the list and my gender expression]. I understood their intention. I didn't take it as discrimination based on my *sekushuariti* [sexuality] [*sic*].... So, I told them I'd leave the center and I immediately did.

Interviewee B said that the list that included her sex assigned at birth brought her a sense of pain. If she had been able to change her gender marker on the family register, which functions as the base document for other legal documents, the shelter manager at her second refuge would not have questioned her identity. The Act on Special Cases in Handling Gender Status for Persons with Gender Identity Disorder (2003) requires that one should obtain a medical diagnosis of "gender identity disorder" and be an adult, unmarried, without a minor child, and sterilized, and have genitals of the gender that one identifies with (Ministry of Justice, 2023a). Having been unable to obtain such a diagnosis due to her schizophrenia and depression, Interviewee B was also unable to change her legal gender markers even if she wanted. The law has therefore hindered some trans people from changing their gender marker.

From the perspective of international human rights law, pathologizing trans identities is mostly frowned upon since the World Health Organization (WHO) changed its policy and wording, recognizing the damage that this pathologization

caused trans people and others with nonconforming gender identities (Human Rights Watch, 2019). The WHO and other UN agencies have criticized the requirement of sterilization for legal gender marker changes, as it violates one's human rights and is against international human rights standards (WHO et al., 2014).

Interviewees H and J, health service providers in a same-gender relationship, did not need to seek shelters when the earthquake hit. They worked at an evacuation shelter for local residents and remembered what its reception was like:

> Evacuees had to check in in front of everyone. There were tables in the hall entrance and [local government] officials would ask evacuees questions and write down [the answers].... Anyone was able to know who's there and hear everything. The evacuees could see other evacuees on the lists.... It would have been difficult for someone who requires special accommodations to speak up about their needs.

Interviewees H and J also said that "what kind of special accommodation may be required [for various groups of vulnerable people] in what ways is not included in the guidance for local government officials or health service providers." This shows that due diligence is not practiced by DRRM stakeholders, such as shelter volunteers and emergency planning officials in local communities, and that there is a lack of awareness of people who would require extra privacy, including trans people. These failures can, as in Interviewee B's case, deny LGBT people's, especially trans people's, access to shelters.

3.2 Restrooms and baths

Access to restrooms and baths is a basic human rights concern and affects one's sanitation and health. The interviewees' narratives suggest that even such basic rights can be inaccessible in times of disaster, especially for trans and other gender-nonconforming people. Interviewee B, a trans woman, was denied access to the women's restrooms. At the initial stage of her refuge, she was told by other women evacuees to use a universal restroom – the church she had evacuated to happened to have one, but not many evacuation shelters are equipped with a universal restroom. As time passed and these women got to know her, she was eventually allowed to use the women's restrooms.

Other interviewees expressed concerns over gender-segregated restrooms and baths. Interviewee E, a trans woman who evacuated to a friend's house amid floods said:

> If I had [had no choice but to evacuate to an evacuation shelter], other evacuees might have wondered who I was when I used a women's restroom. If I was in a women's space and talked

> to someone on the phone, people might have wondered who I was because of my male voice. These things would prevent me from going to an evacuation shelter.

Interviewee B spent three weeks without taking a bath because of her gender identity and expression. She explained:

> If you're a trans man or trans woman with a high level of passing, you may be able to find a way to use a public bath. Even when people offer free baths [for evacuees], I can't go. I may be fine in the water but the problem is the changing room. For example, I wear women's underwear. Trans men would be wearing men's underwear. It would look weird if they were to take off their clothes trying to hide their genitalia among other men. So, I couldn't go. I went to a faraway private public bathhouse [i.e., a public bathhouse with a private bath].

Even when one's level of passing, to be perceived or able to blend in according to your gender identity and expression by others, may be high, gender-segregated shared restrooms and baths can remain a concern for trans people. For example, Interviewee K no longer faces "any inconvenience" because his gender identity, gender expression, and gender marker on the family register match, but he still wondered, "what would I do if the Self-Defense Forces set up baths [which are usually shared and gender-segregated]? What would I do with restrooms if [the effects of the earthquake had been] prolonged?"

Restrooms and baths are often regarded as trans people's issues. Interviewee G, a gay man, however, suggests that the issue is not limited to trans people. While he did not have to evacuate to a shelter, he experienced water shortages and electricity cuts in his apartment and workplace. During that time, he worried that other evacuees may be "confused" and "surprised" if he used restrooms and baths at a shelter because of his gender expression:

> I don't want to have my hair cut short. That doesn't mean I want to wear women's clothes. People tell me that I'm feminine and look like a woman. So, I'm used to other people giving me warnings [on which bathroom to use] because it happens often.

This points to the manner in which spaces are constructed as, and productive of, heteronormative and cisgender identities as the presumed state of all human experience, what planning scholar Petra Doan (2010) and others have called "the tyranny of gendered spaces" (p. 635). Only having separate women's and men's restrooms potentially prevents people whose gender identities do not fall into the gender dichotomy from accessing the very basic human need to urinate. Because access to restrooms affects not only one's right to sanitation but also one's right to life with dignity, right to protection and security, and right to receive humanitarian assistance on the basis of need (The Sphere Project, 2018), universal bathrooms

that are accessible to people from a wide spectrum of genders and abilities would be an appropriate response to this problem.

3.3 Privacy

In Japan, large arenas, schools, or public buildings usually function as evacuation shelters, where evacuees share spaces often without curtains or tents. This poses serious privacy issues for many, including LGBT evacuees. The interviews revealed that a lack of privacy at evacuation shelters could send LGBT evacuees away. Interviewee F, a lesbian, and her same-gender partner returned to their earthquake-damaged apartment as soon as they observed their nearby evacuation shelter. She said:

> Staying in a car felt very cramped and we couldn't sleep. It felt safe but we couldn't stretch our legs. It was impossible [to stay in a car]. So, we went to an elementary school behind our apartment because we heard it had opened as an evacuation shelter.... We figured that there were families, ordinary families. We thought we wouldn't be comfortable staying with them.... We knew some people but not so closely. I think you feel like talking to someone when you have free time [and that could have happened]. I didn't want to talk to any strangers. I didn't want other people to ask difficult questions [e.g., about our relationship]. I was too tired to evacuate to that crowded shelter.

Interviewee E, a trans woman, also thought of fleeing to an evacuation shelter but chose to go to her friend's house instead because of privacy concerns. She said:

> I wasn't sure if a single woman could have her own space or men would have their separate spaces at the shelter. I imagined I might look like a man when I woke up the next morning because I haven't completed hair removal [and I didn't want that to happen in front of other evacuees]. So, I spent three to four nights at my friend's place.

As support providers, Interviewees H and J observed what an evacuation shelter was like. They explained:

> Shelter managers weren't prepared in the beginning. So, all the evacuees slept on the floor together, including older adults and families with children without any privacy. At a later stage, tents and partitions were provided.... They should have been provided earlier.... Spaces were not even gender-segregated at all. We would never want to evacuate to such a shelter.

The right to privacy is recognized under international human rights law, as well as by the Constitution of Japan as a fundamental human right, not only in ordinary times but also in humanitarian settings such as disasters. The Sphere Project

(2018), an initiative led by humanitarian NGOs to set minimum standards and guidance for humanitarian assistance, has articulated that evacuation shelters should be designed to provide privacy. The interviews show that a lack of privacy from LGBT people's perspectives can easily and effectively prevent them from accessing evacuation shelters. As Interviewee F said, "just being physically safe doesn't bring you safety. A sense of safety comes when privacy is respected."

3.4 Housing

After leaving evacuation shelters, evacuees either return to their restored housing or move to temporary housing that is specifically constructed or rented for evacuees who are unable to rebuild their housing based on Article 23 of the Disaster Relief Act (1947), under which municipal governments are responsible for the practical business of providing housing for evacuees. Eligibility for temporary housing often includes being from the same household unless you are a single-person household. Due to this condition, same-gender couples are effectively excluded from public housing because the same household is defined as "the head of the household and one's spouse" or "husband and wife with a child (or children)" (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2009). They are substantially excluded because their relationship is not considered spousal under Japanese law.

Although none of the interviewees had to live in the temporary or rented housing for evacuees, concerns regarding housing accessibility were raised specifically by those in same-gender relationships. Interviewee D, a gay man, is considering registering his same-gender partnership in his local municipality, which recognizes such relationships. He said:

> I have never had to apply for public housing in my life before, so it didn't bother me. But I'm aware now that the effects of partnership recognition differ from one local municipality to another and it could affect me when my apartment collapses [by disaster] and I want to apply [for temporary housing for evacuees].

Interviewee F, a lesbian in a same-gender relationship, also questions housing accessibility and the effects of partnership recognition by her local municipality. She said:

> I know that the partnership system in my locality is useless because I was involved in advocating for the system. It's just like a token. We're negotiating with the local government [for the system to be improved effectively] on public housing.... So, the partnership system isn't useful [for housing, including temporary evacuee housing].

She felt that her partner was "treated as nonexistent," not only in housing but also when she applied for allowance for their damaged apartment and consolation allowance for the disaster-affected because the allowances were provided on a household basis.

The same-gender couple Interviewees H and J wondered whether gay couples might face greater problems in applying for temporary housing because they have observed more social acceptance for two women being together than for two men.

Housing is another basic human right. It is recognized as an integral part of right to life by the Japanese Constitution and by international human rights and humanitarian laws. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and UN-Habitat (2014) illustrated that the entitlements of the right to housing includes "equal and non-discriminatory access to adequate housing" (p. 3). The interviews indicate that this is not substantially guaranteed to LGBT people, more specifically people in same-gender relationships, both in peacetime and in the aftermath of disasters.

3.5 Medication

Access to medication affects anyone who is on medication regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The interviews revealed that LGBT people, too, could face hurdles in accessing medication in times of disaster. When floods hit her locality, Interviewee E, a trans woman, was unable to pick up her new stock of hormone pills that she had imported from abroad because roads to the nearby post office were disrupted.

Interviewee D, a gay man, remembers that his local health centers became too busy responding to food poisoning that had occurred at evacuation shelters to continue HIV testing. He wondered "there must have been people who were anxious [about their HIV status but couldn't get tested] during that period."

Interviewee A, a bisexual woman who provided support for a trans woman with a disability in the aftermath of the earthquakes said:

> There are things that only the people concerned know, including the issue of hormone medication. Not many would be able to respond even when [hormone] medication is sent to evacuation shelters.... It would help if there were even just one person who knows about the medication that gender and sexual minority people need, including hormones [sent to evacuation shelters], in a team, or if they wore rainbow signs around their arms so that LGBT evacuees can seek to consult them.

3.6 Inclusion/exclusion

As illustrated above regarding the privacy issues, non-inclusive evacuation shelters effectively turn away LGBT people. After having left the second refuge, Interviewee B, a trans woman, moved to a church that had previously asked her to come over to fix electrical facilities as a licensed electrician. She ended up spending one and a half months at the church. Her pastor was informed that she was a trans woman. Other church members, however, were not informed and seemed to wonder about her gender. She said, "I didn't want to stay inside. No one would talk to me other than the pastor, even during meals. So, I told the church to let me park my car [behind the church] and stay there." While this may seem to be her own choice, it points to the likelihood that any LGBT person can be turned away from a non-inclusive environment and suffer substantial exclusion from shelters, even if that were unintended by shelter managers and/or other evacuees.

3.7 Intersectionality

Foundational research on intersectionality, that is, the manner in which various forms of identity intersect with one another in ways that compound, complicate, alleviate, or ameliorate various forms of vulnerability (Crenshaw, 1995), can offer a useful lens with which to view these challenges in the disaster context. Because all human beings are compounds of multiple characteristics, it is these connected axes of identity that produce specific subjects and experiences (Crenshaw, 1995; Hill Collins, 2019). In short, the intersection of LGBT and other identities can increase one's vulnerability. Interviewee A provided care to a trans woman with an intellectual disability, who was forced to use facilities of her sex assigned at birth, not of her gender identity, during her refuge. Interviewee A recalled:

> Around the seventh day since we evacuated, a nearby gym offered all evacuees at our evacuation shelter free baths.... At the gym, baths were gender-segregated. [I wondered] what can I do for her and what does she want? She could surprise other women [as a trans woman in transition].... She screams when she is happy because of her intellectual disability, which itself is not a problem. If she screams in a changing room when other people, especially when many older adults are around, however, it is difficult to explain [her condition to others] and we [care providers] weren't ready.... In the end, her male care provider convinced her to use the men's bath, saying that care providers weren't ready and she was still in a male body anyway.

Interviewee A said that able-bodied trans people might be able to flee to an accepting friend's house but that was often not an option for sexual and gender minorities with disabilities.

Interviewee F, a lesbian, lives with a physical disability. When asked whether she thought of fleeing to one of the welfare evacuation shelters, she said "until just now, I didn't know there are such things as welfare evacuation shelters." These shelters were designed for evacuees who require special accommodations based on the Basic Act on Disaster Management (1961), in which Article 8–2(2)15 defines people requiring special accommodation as "the elderly, disabled persons, infants, and others requiring special care" (Ministry of Justice, 2023b). She could have evacuated to one of the welfare evacuation shelters as a person with disability but she was not aware of their existence. Future research is required to determine whether such shelters are welcoming of LGBT evacuees with disabilities or whether "others requiring special care" includes able-bodied LGBT evacuees.

4 Resilience

It has become evident that LGBT interviewees and their community members showed their resilience through not only having coped with difficult situations presented by disasters but having helped others in the aftermath of disasters. For example, as illustrated above, Interviewee A, a bisexual woman, kept providing care for a trans woman with a disability. Interviewees H and J served local evacuees at an evacuation shelter as medical service providers. In addition to helping her church as an electrician, Interviewee B, a trans woman, volunteered in a soup kitchen, showed the way to disaster medical assistance teams, and put back fallen furniture for older adults. Interviewee C, a pansexual woman, cared for her children who were frightened by the earthquakes and the aftershocks that followed. Interviewee G, a gay man, kept providing care for people with disability in his workplace even during the power outages.

Interviewee F, a lesbian, and Interviewee K, a trans man, witnessed gay and lesbian bars helping LGBT people and local community members. Interviewee F recalled:

> A gay friend of mine who owns a gay bar texted me asking me if we were OK. I texted back saying my cellphone's battery may run out soon. Then he told me to come over to charge [the phone] with his car. He also told me to come to his bar if we were hungry because he was planning to open a soup kitchen [for the disaster affected]. So, my partner and I went there at around 9:00 p.m. the next day after the earthquake…. When we arrived, there were many women and children inside the bar. These women were saying that they felt safe being around a man even if he may be gay.

Interviewee K also said that he knew a gay bar that opened its space for anyone in need, including for those who wanted to use a bathroom safely.

Interviewee D, a gay man, played a key role at an evacuation shelter where he stayed. While he continued going to his office during the day, he negotiated with the shelter managers to allow him to open a soup kitchen at the shelter with vegetables, rice, and other food he asked his friends to bring. In addition, he disseminated information via social media to tell any LGBT survivors that he was at the shelter if they needed support. Early during his refuge, he saw a poster of an LGBT event on the shelter wall, and he talked to one of the shelter managers to connect him with any LGBT evacuees who might need help. He said to the manager:

> I'm gay. I'm part of the event whose poster is up on the wall and involved [in LGBT communities]. I don't know what kind of difficulties LGBT people face, but please talk to me if you know any evacuee who may need someone to talk to. They may not come to me because I'm a stranger, but they might come to you as you're a shelter manager. There may be something I can help with.

After experiencing floods, Interviewee E, a trans woman, took a training course to become a *bōsaishi* (certified DRRM officer) "hoping to create evacuation shelters where I would feel safe evacuating to" in future disasters. She even joined an association of women *bōsaishi*, hoping to change aspects about evacuation shelters and their management that affected trans people.

In disaster studies, resilience is a key concept coupled with vulnerability. Resilience is understood as "the ability of individuals, communities and countries in highly disruptive events, like disasters, to maintain relatively stable psychological and social functioning, allowing for the capacity to access and organise resources, and 'spring back' in a timely and efficient manner" (Dominey-Howes et al., 2014, p. 908). The concept has been criticized, as it has been used by neoliberal ideologies that attempt to limit state involvement and increase self-reliance (Cretney, 2014). NGOs, local community groups, and activists, however, have been using resilience in order to address social issues. Resilience in a disaster context still has value for its belief in the human capacity to be, to cope with, and to make things better in difficult circumstances.

Women are recognized not only as being susceptible to disasters but also as resilient change agents (Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery, 2018; Moreno, 2020; Moreno & Shaw, 2018). The interviewees' narratives of resilience suggest the same for LGBT people. While LGBT disaster survivors experience specific struggles in cis-heteronormative disaster responses, they help themselves and others. The rights of all evacuees, including LGBT people, must be protected, but at the same time it is essential that LGBT people are not perceived simply

as sufferers or victims in a disaster context because it diminishes their agency and disempowers them. Furthermore, diminishing potential contributors of disaster responses and reconstruction impedes the resilience of communities and of society (Yamashita et al., 2017, p. 66). In addition to specific measures to systematically respond to barriers that LGBT people experience at different stages of disasters, the importance of "meaningful consultation with LGBTQI individuals and organizations at each stage of humanitarian response" (The Sphere Project, 2018) is highlighted as a standard in global humanitarian responses from both community and individual resilience perspectives.

5 Problems with the current DRRM policies from an LGBT lens

Some research has revealed how much local governments respond to LGBT needs in their post-2011 DRRM policies. According to Ōsawa (2019), only 12.8 % of all 47 prefectures and 1.7 % of 1,171 municipalities (64.8 % of all municipalities in Japan) included "consideration of LGBT [people]" in their guidelines on evacuation shelter management as of early 2018 (p. 35). There has since been a rapid increase from 12.8 % to 63.8 % of all 47 prefectures in 2021 ("Saigai hinan," 2021). In 2020, it was revealed that only 9.6 % of six prefectures and 77 of 227 local municipalities in the Tohoku region have such references ("Saigaiji seiteki shōsūsha," 2020). Among the 31 local municipalities that have introduced the same-gender partnership system in the Tokyo area, 41.9 % have these references ("LGBT hairyo," 2021).

Slow changes at a local municipality level, in contrast to prefectural-level changes, can be attributed to: (a) the lack of a gender lens in various policies and their implementation, (b) a narrow gender framework that is based on the gender binary and heterosexism, and (c) a lack of DRRM initiatives by the national government. Firstly, 5.9 % of local municipalities with LGBT references in their DRRM policies have a division in charge of promoting gender equality that collaborates with the disaster management division. In those without the references, the number decreases to 0.8 % (Ōsawa, 2019, p. 16). This suggests that collaboration between these divisions can help to make DRRM policies more equitable in terms of gender and thereby increase the chance of LGBT perspectives being considered.

Jendā (gender), however, seems to remain narrowly defined as (cis, heterosexual) women's issues in DRRM policy areas in Japan. This is reflected in the guidelines for disaster response published by the Gender Equality Bureau in 2020, whose title refers only to "women's perspectives" (*josei no shiten*). While the guidelines do state that taking DRRM measures from women's perspectives "should con-

tribute to the accommodation of various people such as children, young people, older adults, people with disabilities, and LGBT people" (Gender Equality Bureau, 2020, para. 2), they fail to outline the specific barriers that LGBT people face or the necessary measures to be taken.

These 2020 guidelines show how little initiative the national government is taking to include LGBT people's needs in national DRRM policies and consequently local policies. The primary responsibility to protect the lives, livelihood, and rights of people in the country lies with the state. Based on the current national DRRM policies, however, the Japanese government is not fulfilling this responsibility. It could provide leadership to local governments, especially local municipalities, through DRRM laws and policies that consider the specific barriers faced by LGBT people, which have been elaborated and expanded with suggested measures in the Sphere Project's (2018) *Sphere Handbook: Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response*. The experiences described by the interviews with individuals in the present study underscore how national and local DRRM policies must respond to LGBT people's needs based on their lived experiences, which have become evident since the Great East Japan Earthquake.

6 Conclusion

While the Great East Japan Earthquake caused serious damage to Japanese society, it has functioned as an opportunity for LGBT communities to make their barriers and needs more visible. The barriers and needs are often continuations of existing hurdles that legal, policy, and social situations present to LGBT people in their daily lives.

In this paper, 10 interviews held with LGBT survivors of three disasters after the Great East Japan Earthquake – the Kumamoto earthquakes, typhoons in Hokkaido and the Tohoku region, and the Hokkaido Eastern Iburi Earthquake – have reaffirmed that LGBT people experience various challenges in disasters – evacuee lists, restrooms and baths, privacy, housing, medication, inclusion/exclusion, and intersectionality – which can be attributed to a lack of responsiveness to their needs in national and local DRRM policies.

One key common theme that emerged is that all of the interviewees had at least one person in their life to whom they were out about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Those who sought refuge at a parents' house, friend's house, or evacuation shelter indicated that having already come out made it easier for them to ask for help. This does not by any means indicate that LGBT people should come out in preparation for disasters. Rather, what it suggests is that when LGBT people have a supportive person in their life to whom they have

come out, this decreases the stress of having to manage the secrecy around their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and having to deal with struggles by themselves. Thus, it can increase their resilience in disasters.

One important element that did not emerge from the interviews is sexual and gender-based violence. While gradually accumulated evidence from different parts of the world, including Japan, show that the reports of such violence increase after disasters (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2018), further research is needed to investigate the realities that LGBT people face in the aftermath of disasters.

Lastly, Japan's DRRM policies have begun to reflect the needs of LGBT people since the 2011 disaster, as seen in a growing number of prefectural policies. However, municipal (at a city, town, and village level) and national policies in particular still do not recognize LGBT people as a vulnerable community or as individuals with resilience and agency. There is a continuing need for DRRM policies at all levels of government in Japan to be based on an understanding of the diversity of sexual orientation, gender identity and/or expression to protect the lives, livelihood, and rights of all.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the editors Kazuyoshi Kawasaka and Stefan Würrer for their patience and insightful feedback. I also thank the late Dr. Paul Chamness Iida for his contribution to this book and warm guidance. I am grateful to all the interviewees and the organizers of the local LGBT groups, who made the interviews possible, as well as Dr. Natasha Fox, who provided me with research advice and constant guidance. This paper contains the outcomes of the "Research on Vulnerability and Resilience of Sexual Minority Disaster Survivors and Potential of DRRM Policies," funded by the Grant-in-Aid for Early-Career Scientists of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Sciences (18K13965), Principal investigator: Yamashita Azusa.

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Appendix A: Participant consent form (English translation)

"Research on vulnerability and resilience of sexual minority disaster survivors and potential of DRRM policies" funded by Grant-in-Aid for Early-Career Scientists of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Sciences

Things I would like your understanding on before you take part in this research:

This form contains information regarding this research such as research objectives and potential risks and benefits by taking part in this research.

- Generally, the main objective of conducting research is to contribute to the overall body of knowledge by gaining knowledge about a certain phenomenon
- Generally, research outcomes will be published in conference presentations and academic journals. In this research, the research outcomes will be published in a way that interviewees will not be identified.
- Participation in this study is not compulsory. You may change your decision even after you have agreed to participate in this study.
- Please read this form and feel free to contact the researcher if you have any questions or concerns.
- There will be no disadvantages for you if you decide not to take part in this research.

1 Research objective

In Japan, since the Great East Japan Earthquake, large-scale disasters have continued to occur throughout the country, including the Kumamoto Earthquakes and the torrential rains in Hokkaido and Tohoku. Research on the experiences of sexual minority disaster survivors is limited. In addition, it has not yet been verified whether the perspectives of sexual minorities are reflected in the support provision for disaster survivors and disaster reduction and management policies – the importance of which has been pointed out since the Great East Japan Earthquake – in other disasters.

Therefore, this research aims to contribute to the field of disaster reduction and management policy and humanitarian policy in Japan and abroad by identifying struggles faced by sexual minority survivors of disasters in Japan after the Great East Japan Earthquake, and by identifying how much the international

standards (the Sphere Principle) on the right to a life with dignity and non-discrimination are reflected in disaster reduction and management policy, as well as factors that make it difficult to reflect the principle.

2 Researcher

Yamashita Azusa, Assistant Professor, Hirosaki University

3 Details of participation in this research

You will be interviewed about your experiences as a gender and sexual minority during disasters. During the interview, please answer only the questions that you feel you can answer. One or two people each who have experienced the torrential rains in Hokkaido and Tohoku, the Kumamoto earthquakes, and the Hokkaido Iburi Tobu Earthquake are asked to participate. The interviews will last about an hour.

4 Potential risks of participating in this research

There are potential risks associated with this study, such as the possibility of personal information leakage and the possibility that some of the questions in this study may cause you psychological discomfort or upset. In such a case, please inform the researcher immediately. You will be referred to the appropriate contact person for assistance.

In addition, the possibility of personal information leakage will be minimized through the following procedures. The recording of the interview survey will be converted to text and destroyed within one month. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms will be used for all research data. The consent form and the honorarium payment form may serve as identifiable documents of the research participants, but these forms will not be linked to the textual research data in any way. All data related to the research will be stored in a lockable room after the research is completed. Ten years after the completion of the research, all data related to the research will be disposed of.

5 Benefits of participating in this research

It is unlikely that participation in this study will bring you direct benefits. This study, however, will contribute to increasing knowledge about the disaster experiences of sexual minorities in Japan and abroad, as well as to general knowledge about diversity-informed disaster management policies.

6 Contact

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact me below.
Yamashita Azusa
Phone: [redacted text] Email: [redacted text]

7 Handling of research data

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be interviewed privately. The interview will be audio-recorded. After the recording, the data will be converted to text by the researcher within one month. Pseudonyms will be used for the textual data. After that, the recording will be erased and any notes taken at the interview will be destroyed. Therefore, the participants' identities will not be confirmed by any reference to them in the interviews. This form and the receipt of the honorarium may serve as verifiable documentation of the participant's identity; therefore, any information revealed by the participant in the interviews will not reveal your identity. After the completion of this study, all data will be stored in a lockable room and will be disposed of appropriately after 10 years.

8 Changing your mind about participating in this research

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You will not be disadvantaged in any way by refusing to participate in the study. You may refuse to answer certain questions. If you do so, you may be asked the reason for your refusal. You may also choose to discontinue your participation in the research. In this case, the recorded information will be destroyed. If you experience mental discomfort or similar problems during the interview, the researcher may decide to terminate your participation in the study. In this case, you may be referred to an appropriate contact person to help you deal with the mental discomfort or upset.

9 Cost of participating in this research

There is no cost to participate in the interview survey. You will receive an honorarium (a book coupon) for your participation in the research.

10 Consent to participate in this research

By signing the form below, you give your consent to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that you have decided to participate in the study, that you understand the implications of your participation in the study, and that you have carefully read and understood the information above.

Name (signature) of the interviewee:
Name (signature) of the interviewer:
Date:

Appendix B: Interview questions (English translation)

- What disaster(s) were you affected by?
- When the disaster(s) occurred, where were you and what were you doing? Please share the damages caused to you.
- Did you experience any struggles and/or anxiety when you were affected by the disaster(s)? If yes, can you describe the struggles and/or anxiety?
- Please tell me about your sexuality and coming out status.
- Were you connected to any support group when the disaster(s) occurred? If yes, please share since when and in what way were you connected to the support group?
- How important is the connection with the group to you?
- Did you receive any support from a sexual minority support group when the disaster(S) occurred? If yes, please tell me what kind of support it was and whether it was helpful.
- Did you receive any support from a group other than a sexual minority group? If yes, please tell me what kind of support it was and whether it was helpful.
- Were there any other kinds of support and/or environments you wished to receive/have but couldn't?
- What kind of support and/or environment did you want or would you want (for future disasters)?
- Have you shared your experiences of surviving a disaster with someone or have you taken any actions as a result of being affected by the disaster?
- Can you tell me your age, education, occupation, who you're living with, and nationality?