

Rainbow Human Rights Forum at MIC: Thinking Together about LGBTQ in Miyazaki

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Abstract

This article reports on a forum on LGBTQ equality held at MIC on January 2019. The report outlines the content of the forum before moving on to discuss how LGBTQ equality relates to other issues such as gender equality and identity for young people in Japan today. It is suggested that events like the forum may help to increase the understanding of LGBTQ points of view particularly from the perspective of cultivating intergenerational dialogue.

Introduction

MIC held a seminar in conjunction with Rainbow View Miyazaki, a local human rights organization focused on LGBTQ equality, in January 2019. The seminar was open to the public and attracted local people of all ages. About 200 people attended. It was impressive both as evidence of students thinking critically, initiating and organizing for themselves and as a clear introduction to human rights in that most private of areas, gender and sexuality. It was also significant that Miyazaki Prefectural government supported the forum. In this short reflection I will write about the forum and its significance in the context of discussion about human rights in Japan today.

The Forum at MIC

The original contact between MIC and Rainbow View, Miyazaki was initiated by two students after they returned from the USA. They noticed that the US university campus had support for LGBT students. Being gay seemed to be socially acceptable in the USA in a way that it was not in Japan. However, they found an organization called “Rainbow View”, a monthly discussion group set up by activist Kenji Yamada, and invited the organizers to have an event at MIC.

Rainbow View aims to provide a safe space for talking about personal issues especially focusing on gender dysphoria issues and sexuality. They work both to influence public awareness and to provide a place where LGBTQ people can talk. Each month they have a meeting which includes a period of time open to anyone who is interested followed by a closed meeting for confidential issues. The forum at MIC followed a somewhat similar pattern. Aya Kasai and Erik Bond of MIC helped the students to organize the forum. However students acted as M.C. and facilitators with a degree of confidence which left no doubt that the event was their event.

The forum had two parts, a presentation from members of Rainbow Café called “The basic understanding from LGBT standpoint”, and then a time for discussion in small groups focused on themes such as “Laws and legislation for LGBTQ rights”, “Improving LGBTQ life and education in college” and “LGBTQ life in workplaces in Japan”. After a welcome from the students, they read out ground rules about protecting confidentiality to create a safe space for exploring personal issues. Then K. Yamada and A. Egami of Rainbow View gave a presentation

giving definitions of various different aspects of gender and sexuality. They were supported by Hirotaka Kawagoe, a journalist from Miyanichi Newspaper. The clarity and friendliness of the presenters contributed to making the presentation open and unthreatening. They shared their personal stories and the story of creating Rainbow View.

Presenters explained the differences between gender expression (what you do, how you dress) and gender identity (feeling masculine or feminine or transgender), sexual characteristics (your physical characteristics) and sexual orientation (who you are attracted to). It was explained that various choices such as wearing a dress or having feelings of attraction to same or different gender are not contingent on one another. The degree to which such things are kept private should also be a choice. A person might be gay or lesbian but not want to be an advocate or representative. Another person might be an advocate (or “ally”), but that person might not be LGBTQ. One message was that one should not make assumptions and, equally, everyone should be free not to have assumptions made about them. Name-calling and “outing” (publicly identifying someone as gay without their consent) could cause great unhappiness. But also, depression could be caused by being forced to hide one’s true identity. They explained that this connects with why LGBTQ rights are important. It is difficult to gather statistics on suicide related to LGBTQ issues but evidence suggests that a number of teenagers and adults may be driven to suicide by bullying or simply lack of social acceptance.

Students’ interest in LGBTQ issues

In my experience, students have great curiosity about LGBTQ issues. When I was a teaching first year Social Studies/CLIL class on the Intensive English program at Kansai Gaidai University in 2012-13, I asked students to choose one chapter from a textbook called *Fifty Facts Which Should Change the World* and prepare a presentation on the topic. “Same sex marriage is illegal” was the topic which was most-mentioned in their feedback. One student wrote “...because of this my prejudice has gone away.” Another said:

Most important presentation for me is same sex marriage because in some countries same sex is given death penalty. I don’t know why they are given such a heavy penalty.
(Comments reproduced with permission.)

In December 2018, students in my writing class at MIC told me they were doing a debate about LGBTQ rights in their Japanese class and I decided to include an essay option about the topic because they were very interested in it. I noticed that the students tend to use the term LGBTQ as a single category for all non-heterosexual people when writing about the topic. I wondered if there needs to be more explanation of the idea that the coalition exists for the point of lobbying rather than due to actual similarity between lifestyles and identities of people who are lesbian, gay, bi-, trans or queer. In my students’ writing the use of the term LGBTQ has created a kind of “othering” and “lumping together” of some very different experiences and very different kinds of people. One consequence of the forum was to highlight the importance of looking for ways to explore gender identity in the language classroom.

Discussion: heteronormative social pressures in Japan

When discussing LGBTQ issues in Japan, it is worth noticing that the birth rate drop in Japan has ratcheted up the social pressure on young people to get on with establishing a family and by implication to have a heterosexual identity with traditional gender roles. Statements which reinforce

such roles are made at regular intervals by influential figures. One example was the statement by Nikai Toshihiro, the secretary general of the ruling LDP that “Childless couples are ‘selfish’” (*Guardian*, June 27, 2018). In 2015, chief cabinet secretary Yoshihide Suga, announced “I am hoping that mothers will contribute to their country by feeling like they want to have more children.” Perhaps the most infamous of these comments was the one referring to women as “birthing machines” (Minister Yanagisawa, January 2007). Comments like this generally draw an outcry of media disapproval and result in an apology, but they are heard regularly and represent a norm which is slow to change. On the other hand recently, reports of anti-LGBT comments have been removed from news websites. “Ruling party law-maker says that LGBT couples lack productivity” was reported on July 26, 2018 and then the report was withdrawn from the *Japan Times* English news site. An article reporting “Japanese Law-Maker Under Fire for LGBT Comment”, January 6th, 2019 was also withdrawn from the Japan Today Website by February 2019.

The withdrawal suggests that the government does not want to be associated with this kind of view. However, there is still an impact on young people. In their essays some of my students reflected an acceptance of this norm by saying things like “If they are gay they will cause problems for their family” while at the same time wondering “Why do they have to suffer because they are gay?”

In the light of such comments it seems very possible that heteronormative gender roles are prevalent to such an extent and in such a way as to add to the stress of social expectations in Japan. Writing 14 years ago, Leonard Schoppa (2006) suggested that one reason for the falling birthrate in Japan is that women lacked “voice” in society. He makes a connection between lack of political voice and various ways of “opting out” of society by not having children or by emigration or suicide. Although his analysis is somewhat out-of-date in the light of Japan’s new gender equality policy launched with the WAW! Tokyo conference, much work remains to be done. On the positive side, the UN ranked Japan 22nd out of 189 countries globally for gender equality in 2017.

Idealization of “foreign” societies as more liberal than Japan?

As a teacher of English, it is sometimes apparent to me that students project their longing and hopes onto foreign culture and imagined foreign societies. The students I chatted with at the forum imagined that England and the USA would be havens of tolerance and equality. They did not know that it had been illegal to teach about homosexuality in UK schools from 1982 until 2000 and that teaching about LGBTQ issues is still not integrated into sex education in the UK because of cautions against the “promotion” of homosexuality. Same-sex marriage is only legal in 26 countries out of the 190 or so countries in the world. LGBTQ people still suffer from hate speech or prejudice even in countries where same-sex marriage is legal. It is easy to forget this when we only look at liberal environments such as university campuses in Westernized countries.

Through interviews with young adult language learners, Ingrid Piller and Kimie Takahashi (2006) discovered what they called “the *ryugaku* illusion of finding one’s self and one’s *ikigai* in Sydney, New York or some other mythical place in the West” (Piller and Takahashi, 2006). Piller and Takahashi’s interviewees were idealistic young women dreaming about young white men. It seems many students have somewhat utopian fantasies about “Western countries”. Marlen Harrison has written about dual identities in Japanese gay and lesbian communities in which his informants identify as gay in English-speaking contexts but not in Japanese-speaking ones. (2011). One of Harrison’s Japanese interviewees said that he learned English as part of a search for gay identity while another felt she could discover a new self in an English-speaking context. The reasons for this seem to lie in the power of a foreign language to function as a “safe house” free of the cultural restrictions of one’s first language. (Canagarajah, 2004b cited in Harrison, 2011).

In fact, Japan appears to be making an effort to implement legislation to improve rights for people of diverse genders and sexualities, although slowly. According to Dale (2016), two wards in Tokyo, Hokkaido and Okinawa legalized same-sex partnership in 2015. These areas were not, in fact, all that far behind England, which legalized in 2014. Individual officials continued to contest same-sex partnership in some states of the USA until overruled by federal government in June 2018 (Governing.com). Students discussing these issues tended to underestimate the negativity that still exists about unconventional gender and sexuality choices in the UK and USA. I think it is important that young people try to make a society in which they *can* have a voice rather than “opting out” by moving overseas to a place which they only imagine is more liberal than their home country.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Rainbow Human Rights Forum at MIC was an example of an event which encouraged learning and discussion across various divides of age, language, culture and belief. Students played their roles as translators and facilitators with confidence and tact. The discussion in the small group which I joined was well-organized and respectful. Since the conversation was confidential, I will not report it here. But the various things which I learned will certainly help me to understand other people better. I felt that my point of view and my experiences were heard and understood. I will close with an anecdote which illustrates how respectful dialogue can bring about attitude change. Kawagoe Hirotaka of the Miyazaki Newspaper told how an angry reader had phoned him to complain about his reporting on an LGBT event. The person said “This is not news! Why do we need such things in the news?” The journalist listened to the caller for a while and then tried to explain. They talked for about 30 minutes. By the end, the caller calmed down and thanked the journalist, saying that he understood. The forum was full of this kind of respectful dialogue, animated by the optimism of MIC students.

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