



## STIGMA ON LGBT IN JAPAN DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

**Rizky Aurelia Putri Dehars**, Japanese Studies, School of Strategic and Global Studies, Universitas Indonesia, Indonesia, [putridehars@gmail.com](mailto:putridehars@gmail.com)

**Dr Kurniawaty Iskandar**, Japanese Studies, School of Strategic and Global Studies, Universitas Indonesia, Indonesia, [daradwipa@yahoo.com](mailto:daradwipa@yahoo.com)

**Abstract-** With the COVID-19 pandemic spreading across the globe, many countries have been struggling to control the virus outbreak. The virus also changed the way society behaves. Japan is one of the countries that are affected by COVID-19. LGBT community in Japan received particularly heavy burden during COVID-19; from the threat of outing, job loss and the heightened stigma surrounding them. This journal is meant to analyze the relation between the stigma on LGBT and the treatment they received during the pandemic. This journal is using qualitative method with various sources from academic journals, books, and government sites.

**Keywords:** LGBT, Japanese society, COVID-19, stigma

### I. INTRODUCTION

The corona virus that has begun to emerge on the early 2020 is affecting the world in every kinds of aspect. The pandemic first started in Wuhan province, China, and according to the National Health Commission of China the virus spread from the seafood markets in Wuhan (Manabe 2020). On 16 January 2020, Japanese Ministry of Health informed WHO about a confirmed case of corona virus in a person who travelled to Wuhan. On 11<sup>th</sup> March 2020 WHO has declared that the spread of corona virus can be considered a worldwide pandemic. Since then the virus outbreak has spread on a massive scale globally and various countries has struggled on how to handle the increasing cases of corona virus daily [1]. Japan has tried some measurements in order not to get the virus spread any further since the start of the pandemic. One of the measurements is to prevent environmental transmission in “3Cs” which stands for “closed space, crowded places, and close contact settings” [2] In short, the government asked Japanese people not to go to places where there are many people in closed contacts. Despite these efforts, the surges of COVID-19 cases were increasing around mid-March. A state of national emergency is declared on 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020 to help controlling the pandemic trajectory [2]. The impact of the pandemic in Japan is massive and can be seen in different sectors.

Since the pandemic, many of Japanese workers are forced to work from home or those who are unfortunate enough will lose their job. Non-permanent employees and part-time workers are those unfortunate victims of COVID-19. The number of non-permanent employees across Japan is about 22 million and make up for 40% of the total employment rate [3], yet they're the first that were asked to either resign, get fired or have their monthly payment reduced. In early April 2020 a survey conducted by Research Institute for Advancement of Living Standards regarding the impact of COVID-19 to workers suggest that 10.6% of contract workers had been laid off and 56.8% part-time workers' incomes had been reduced due to COVID-19 [3].

Japanese LGBT community is also one of those who got affected by COVID-19. Since the pandemic they have been burdened by various aspects such as the fear of being outed, their deteriorating mental health, but mostly the stigma instilled on LGBT community heightened due to the pandemic. Even before the pandemic, LGBT in Japan had been heavily marginalized because of hetero-normative system in Japanese society. The traditional family ideology in which a family consists of father, mother and children has been rooted deeply in Japanese society [4]. This means LGBT has been excluded from this traditional family ideology [4]. Stigma on LGBT people isn't directly shown; rather the stigma is hidden yet persists in Japanese society which is stated by Tamagawa (2018) as *otonashii* homophobia [5]. There is also *uchi* homophobia that is directed to LGBT people by their family and friends. The closer their relationship is, the homophobia stance is also getting more prominent within the circle [5].

## II. THEORY

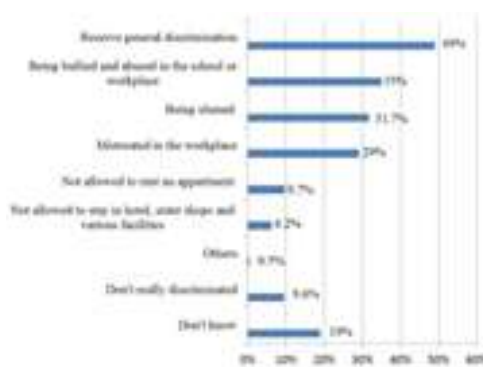
The theory that will be used in this journal is stigma theory by Erving Goffman, a sociologist from mid-20<sup>th</sup> century who researched micro-ethnography, symbols on human bodies, and linguistic interaction [6]. Stigma is originated from Greek where they see stigma as a bodily sign that stated the person's status. Usually criminals, slaves, and the abnormal are the ones who bear such stigma; marked by tattoo on their body [7]. These days stigma refers to shame and disgrace rather than physical mark. Stigma isn't a disease or a condition that is held by certain individual, but it is a social construction to discredit and shun individuals that don't live up to society's expectations [7].

Goffman explains that stigma is categorized into three groups. The first one is physical stigma that's held by the people with physical disability such as the blinds or the mutes. The second is character stigma that's held by the people that have bad characters such as laziness, dishonesty and homosexual. The last one is tribal stigma which is given for people with particular race, ethnicity, or religion and sticks for generations [8]. He called the people who don't have stigma as "the normal". They believe that individuals with certain stigma aren't a real human then proceed to discriminate, shun and bully stigmatized people. These cause the stigmatized people to feel isolated by the society and their life quality decreasing significantly [8].

It can be concluded that stigma is a social construction that refer to sign, symbol, or behavior from an individual resulting in separation and discrimination. Stigma separates those who don't have a stigma and those who hold a certain stigma into 'the normal' and 'the abnormal' [9]. Stigma also contributes in what kind of morals that are being upheld by the society which results on the definition of what's considered right and wrong [10]. Each element within the society will ensure that each member follows the norms and social order as well as punish those who behave outside the norms [11]. With the Japanese population dominated by elderly and the governments pushing Japanese to have more children [12], LGBT are seen as an abnormality because they're not contributing in increasing the population as well as potentially threatening Japanese family system.

## III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based on the survey held by various institutions during 2015-2018, it can be concluded that LGBT population in Japan is around 5% to 8%. The latest by Dentsu Diversity Laboratory on October 2018 with the total 60.000 respondent resulted in 8.9% respondents are a part of LGBT community in Japan [13]. In Japanese society, LGBT often receive discrimination and abuse in their daily lives. Based on the national survey held by Japan Ministry of Law, it can be concluded that the types of discrimination received the most by LGBT are general discrimination, being bullied and abused by their peers, and being shunned by the society [14].



**Fig .1.** Types of discrimination received by LGBT in Japan. *Source* Japan Ministry of Law (2017) "edited by the authors"

Before COVID-19, LGBT in Japan have already facing many difficulties in their daily lives. These difficulties are caused by the stigma in the Japanese society regarding LGBT. Japanese see LGBT as something that is separated from their lives due to their hetero-normative belief [5]. During this COVID-19 pandemic, LGBT in Japan are facing new kinds of difficulties in many sectors. They are worried about the fact that COVID-19 is already spreading across Japan and how the government will tackle this problem. One of the problems that they face is the increasing of domestic abuse [15]. Because of the pandemic, Japanese can't

go outside freely and must work or study from home. Those who live with their parents received harsh words and verbal abuse daily because of their status as LGBT. Moreover, they can't go out and ask for help regarding to the domestic abuse that they received. It is reported that LGBT's mental health is worsening because of the daily verbal abuse and their inability to seek help during COVID-19 [15].

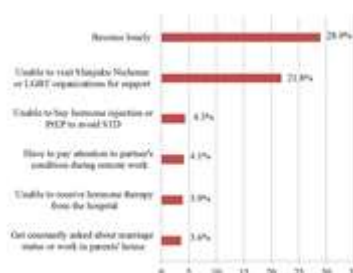


Fig. 2. LGBT mental health's condition during COVID-19 pandemic. Source Job Rainbow (2020) "edited by the authors"

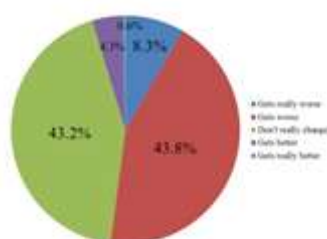


Fig. 3. How COVID-19 pandemic affects LGBT lives the most. Source Job Rainbow (2020) "edited by the authors"

Job Rainbow Co. Ltd, Japan's largest LGBT diversity recruitment company, elaborate that some of the reasons on why their mental health's condition has become worse are domestic abuse from family, unable to meet their partner, anxiety attack, and the lack of support from organizations and community [16]. With the pandemic limiting their access to seek help and move away from their family who don't accept their LGBT status, the abuse and harassment from their family really takes a toll on their mental health. Job Rainbow also summarizes on how the COVID-19 affects them the most in their daily lives. The results are 50% of the respondents feel lonely and unable to visit Shinjuku Nichome, a district famous for LGBT bars and place for community gathering.

Aside from the domestic abuse from their family and the loss of community support, LGBT in Japan also worried that their status as LGBT will be exposed. This situation is possible to happen in case of their partners are diagnosed with COVID-19. If their partner was infected by the virus, they're worried that they had to tell the hospital where their partners are being treated about their status as LGBT. Moreover, LGBT in Japan worries that the hospital won't see them as their partners' family member. In addition, they're also worry that the hospital won't inform them about their partners' health condition [17].

Due to the increasing case of COVID-19 in Japan, hospitals and doctors across the country are asked to handle and prioritize COVID-19 outbreak. This situation impacts trans-genders in Japan. They're worried that their gender reassignment surgery schedule will be postponed and unable to take monthly hormonal therapy. Hiding their identity as a part of LGBT from their family and society is already causing enough stress. Now they also have to worry about the possibility of them or their partner got infected with COVID-19. These factors take a toll on their mental health and wellbeing [12].

To top it all off, their working environment often isn't in their favor and thus makes them hard to admit as an LGBT in fear of discrimination and stigma [18]. Survey held by Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare of Japan on 2019 with more than 2000 companies resulted in less than 20% companies in Japan that have policies which benefit LGBT employees [19]. Moreover 21.8% of workers in the service industry are LGBT workers. They're either got laid off or receive less jobs because of the pandemic.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

All of the discrimination surrounding LGBT is because of the stigma purposes as a barrier between the 'normal' Japanese and the 'abnormal' LGBT community. Japan has constructed that LGBT is seen as people who have undesirable trait and thus must not be accepted in the society. The stigma given by the society is also a form of control for LGBT due to them not behaving in what Japanese society expects them to, resulting on the discrimination and abuse.

Due to COVID-19 pandemic, this stigma only works in their disadvantages. Not to mention the stigma held within their family also makes their mental health worsen. The minimum amount of safe spaces for LGBT and the increasing burden caused by the pandemic make LGBT in Japan vulnerable. Japanese people still uphold their society order strongly and shun LGBT in order to maintain the society order.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Manabe, Y. (2020). Human Rights Restrictions under COVID-19 Pandemic: Comparison between Japan and Portugal. Thesis dissertation, NOVA University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal.
- [2] Shimizu, et al. (2020). Resurgence of covid-19 in Japan. *BMJ*. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m3221>
- [3] Motohashi and Nakatsugawa (2020). Corona Virus Leading to Massive Job Losses Among Non-Permanent Workers. Retrieved from <https://mainichi.jp/articles/20200514/ddm/012/040/100000c>
- [4] Tamagawa, M. (2018). Coming Out of the Closet in Japan: An Exploratory Sociological Study, *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 14, 488-518.
- [5] Tamagawa, M. (2018). Coming Out to Parents in Japan: A Sociocultural Analysis of Lived Experiences, *Sexuality & Culture*, 22, 497-520.
- [6] Handler, R. (2012). What's up, Doctor Goffman? Tell us where the action is!. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 18, 179-190.
- [7] Ramasubramanian, S dan Aya Yadlin-Segal. "Media's Influence on Stigma". *International Encyclopedias of Media Effects*. John Wiley & Sons Inc. 2017. 1-10
- [8] Goffman, E. (1990). *Stigma*. London: Penguin Group
- [9] Pescosolido, B.A. (2015). The Stigma Complex. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 41, 87-116.
- [10] Fawn. N. G. (2009). Role-Taking And Recidivism: A Test Of Differential Social Control Theory. Dissertation, University of Maryland
- [11] Costello, B.J. dan John H. Laub. (2020). Social Control Theory: The Legacy of Travis Hirschi's Causes of Delinquency. *Annual Review of Criminology*, 3, 21-41.
- [12] Iskandar, K. (2020) Japan Aging Issues, Long Term Care Insurance (LTCI) and The Migration of Indonesian Nurse to Enter Japan Labor Market. *Journal of Strategic and Global Studies*, 2, 18-39
- [13] Nakanishi, E. (2017). Current Status and Issues Regarding LGBT: Discrimination Regarding Sexual Orientation Or Gender Identity And Movements To Eliminate It. *Legislation and Survey*, 394, 3-17.
- [14] Japan Ministry of Law. (2017). Eliminate prejudice and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and self-identification. Retrieved from [http://www.moj.go.jp/JINKEN/jinken04\\_00126.html](http://www.moj.go.jp/JINKEN/jinken04_00126.html)
- [15] Matsuoka, M. (2020). If my partner gets infected: The "Pride" I'm heading to as a gay. Retrieved from [https://www.huffingtonpost.jp/entry/story\\_jp\\_5ea27a81c5b6d376358cf71d](https://www.huffingtonpost.jp/entry/story_jp_5ea27a81c5b6d376358cf71d).
- [16] Job Rainbow. (2020). Questionnaire report on the actual situation of the impact of LGBT on working environment and job hunting activities. Retrieved from [https://jobrainbow.jp/download\\_contents/18](https://jobrainbow.jp/download_contents/18)
- [17] Kyodo. (2020). LGBT people in Japan worry getting coronavirus may results in outing. Retrieved from <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2020/04/1a1e3bc43b22-lgbt-people-in-japan-worry-getting-coronavirus-may-result-in-outing.html>
- [18] Wee, Amanda (2020). Survey on impact of the coronavirus on LGBT in Japan. Retrieved from <https://zenbird.media/survey-on-impact-of-the-coronavirus-on-lgbt-in-japan/>
- [19] Kyodo. (2020). Only 10% of firms in Japan have addressed LGBT issues: survey. Retrieved from <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2020/06/28b61a1c2657-only-10-of-firms-in-japan-have-addressed-lgbt-issues-survey.html>