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THE SEVENTH ISSUE OF FIHRM-AP - UNVEILING SURVIVAL CHALLENGES OF LGBT REFUGEES - FLEEING FROM WAR OR PERSECUTION?

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Satomi Shimada is the Representative Director of Rainbow Refugee Japan Connection (RRCJ), a corporate that supports African refugees who are persecuted for being part of the LGBT community. In the beginning, Shimada met Ugandans seeking help through online communities, which started her campaigns and assistance projects, such as raising funds online for refugees in Kakuma Refugee Camp in the northwestern part of Kenya and those in the capital Nairobi. In June 2018, Shimada was the first activist to organize LGBT Pride events (gay parade) in refugee camps and to send out rainbow flags in support of the events. Her goal is to resettle these refugees in Japan through third country resettlement.

Shimada herself is a transsexual person, and she believes that “we (LGBT people) were born to eliminate discrimination and racial conflicts.”

About RRCJ

Rainbow Refugee Connection Japan (RRCJ) is a group that supports LGBT refugees. Founded on November 7, 2018., RRCJ provides financial support and information to LGBT refugees from East Africa and it works with countries that accept these people. There are also campaigns carried out in Japan to spread knowledge about these groups in need of aid.

LGBT refugees, or rainbow refugees, refer to people who flee their home countries due to persecution based on sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) not accepted by the laws and society. Such persecution sometimes happens not only in countries the

refugees are from, but also places they flee to due to conflict or other causes, often accompanied with mistreatment in refugee camps.

Unveiling Survival Challenges of LGBT Refugees - Fleeing from War or Persecution?

Kakuma Refugee Camp

Located in the western region of Kenya, Kakuma Refugee Camp was established in 1991 by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). It is the second largest refugee camp in Kenya with influxes driven by war, ethnic and religious conflicts, and persecution due to individuals' gender identity. There are also LGBT groups fleeing from neighboring countries to seek asylum in a third State, and the camp serves as an essential temporary haven during transit. While a third country settlement mechanism allows refugees to relocate to places without anti-LGBT laws, only a handful of States really accept them for resettlement.

In 2018, I visited Kakuma Camp in Kenya. There were LGBT refugees from Uganda, and they shared the persecution they have encountered where they came from. The next year, I went back to Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, where some refugees managed to settle, and they talked about what they have been through under Kenya's anti-LGBT bill.

Since Kenya imposes anti-LGBT laws, refugees of such background may face persecution even after fleeing to the camp. They shared stories of a male homosexual coming from Uganda as a victim of violence due to his gender identity, but nothing has changed since he arrived in Kenya. There is another person who fled to Kenya because his/her friend was put in jail, as LGBT individuals are more likely to be arrested in Uganda.



August 2018; I met with LGBT refugees in Kakuma Refugee Camp and experienced what they go through every day, fearing persecution. Even in the camp, people are threatened with arrest for being part of the LGBT community; I learned what it was like to be looking over your shoulder all the time.

Support and shelter for LGBT refugees

We continued to assist LGBT refugees settled in Kenya in ways such as providing transportation to hospitals and obtaining medication. Other than shelters set up for those in urban areas, we even started breeding poultry in Kakuma Camp, in the aim of enhancing financial inclusion and improving

their living conditions.

In addition, we tried appealing to the Japanese government to take the lead in accepting LGBT refugees from East Africa, but the government acknowledged to take only those from Southeast Asia. For this reason, the few rainbow refugees from East Africa currently living in Japan are those who managed to travel half the globe on their own; we help them with applying for asylum, finding shelter, and securing jobs.

For a rare number of those who could afford flights and visas to enter Japan, we assist them with finding accommodation and jobs. It is not easy for them to learn Japanese, and they may sometimes take jobs at lower levels of wages and employability because of language barriers.

2019; revisiting LGBT refugees settled in Kenya's capital, Nairobi.

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Are LGBT refugees fleeing war?

In 2017, we found that many Japanese knew the term “LGBT,” but do not know what exactly it means to be an LGBT refugee, partially because there was almost no coverage of such topics in Japan’s mainstream media. I was often asked, “Do ‘LGBT refugees’ refer to LGBT people who flee war?” Few people in Japan know that people could be persecuted simply for their gender identity, hence fleeing their homes.

Through events such as Tokyo Rainbow Pride and speeches at universities, we tried to introduce to the public information of LGBT refugees from East Africa. Another example of our campaigns was the stands set up at the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD), organized by Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At the event, we found that even though some people are aware of the persecution of homosexuals in the Middle East, they did not know much about the anti-LGBT laws in Africa. Therefore, these campaigns and efforts are arranged to raise more people’s awareness of the challenges faced by these refugees.

In August 2019, we attended the TICAD, which was a great exposure of our work. In June 2021 and 2022, at Pride House Tokyo Legacy, one of the venues during Tokyo Rainbow Pride, there were stories and artifacts by LGBT refugees, and also a magazine from Uganda that covered stories of Rainbow Refugee Connection Japan. At Tokyo Rainbow Pride in April 2022, there was a display of leaflets with information of LGBT refugees and handicrafts they made. These occasions allowed visitors to have a closer look at the life of these groups for the first time by reading personal stories from the refugees and feeling the artifacts with their own hands.



Exhibits at Pride House Tokyo Legacy in June 2021 for World Refugee Day

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Handmade aprons and shirts by LGBT refugees from Uganda sold during Tokyo Rainbow Pride in April 2022

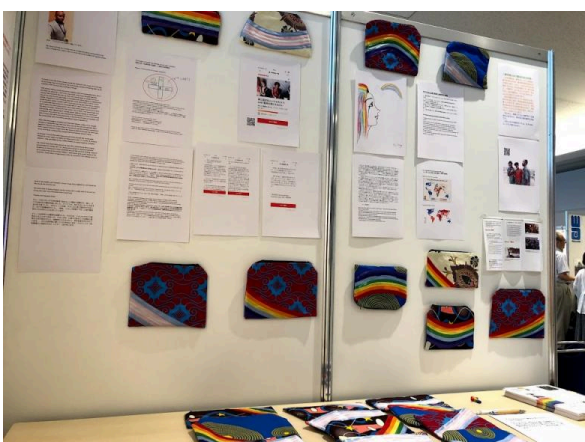
With unjust laws come a violent society

Through the paintings and handicrafts by LGBT refugees, many visitors, for the first time in their life, learned that there is such a group of people out there. To most people in Japan, a person does not get arrested for being gay, so they have a hard time understanding why it is quite the opposite in Uganda. In that regard, I felt deeply obliged to elaborate on how anti-LGBT laws have become more aggressive with harsher sentencing. The key takeaway I wished the visitors could bear in mind was that laws and regulations affect how people think and behave, which could potentially cause violence against LGBT people.

During the exhibition, we received positive feedback on the LGBT community in Japan. For instance, people realize that unjust laws breed a society of violence, while good ones bring harmony. In that spirit, visitors began to realize that LGBT groups will need more legal protections.



Personal stories of LGBT groups presented at the Tokyo International Conference on African Development.



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With events and aid for LGBT refugees, we have also built connections with other pro-LGBT communities in Japan. There are groups that manage shelters, organizers of Tokyo Rainbow Pride, places such as Pride House Tokyo, and even LGBT Christian groups, which all grant us more access to public exposure. Refugees, thus, are more included in local communities, so that they do not feel left out. Young LGBT individuals excluded from their families now have the chance to start over and build rainbow families of their own.

Recommendations:

["A life of 'constant fear': The plight of African LGBTQ refugees"](#) from National Catholic Reporter