

**Investigation of Gender Binary related to Gender Identity in Japan  
through Non-Binary Individuals' Perceptions**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

LGBTQ individuals have an inferior status in Japanese society. Though Japanese society seems to have become more conscious of that fact, no effective action has been taken to make the situation better. In this study, non-binary individuals' perceptions were investigated to find the core of that situation's cause. Non-binary individuals are focused on among LGBTQ people because they can be distinguished from lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals in that they do not fit into the socially constructed categories of "man" and "woman". In order to collect data, interviews were conducted with non-binary individuals from an organization for LGBTQ people. As a result, it was found that the ideological thinking and systems which have been founded on the gender binary create an unfair situation for non-binary individuals in Japanese society. This way of categorizing people into either ideological group of "man" and "woman" is also related to problems other oppressed groups experience. These findings suggest an important need for changing the social structures or ideas that categorize people into two sexes or genders into ones that see people as individuals. There are actions that individuals can take and the organization or government should take. Still, it is needed in either case for people to become aware of the fact that they are socialized to believe in the gender binary and it is used to rationalize the unfair situation for those who do not fit into it in various ways.

## **Literature Review**

The acronym LGBTQ is often distinguished based on one's sexual orientation and gender identity. Sexual orientation is generally understood as the person's identity in relation to which gender identity they are likely to be sexually attracted to, which often means whether they are homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual (Moriyama, 2017). This idea is especially used when talking about gay, lesbian, or bi individuals. Gender identity is the individual's sense of having a gender, that generally means whether they identify as female or male. This

idea is often used when discussing transgender individual (ibid.). This acronym is often applied to explain the varieties of sexuality and gender. On the other hand, categorizing people based on whether they are homosexual or heterosexual, and male or female is an ideological construct which is socially created, and has been socialized into people in Japan. This influential ideology is called gender binary, and it is creating difficult situations for LGBTQ people in Japan (Tanaka, 2006).

Gender binary is the idea that there are only two categories of male and female in society. This idea of gender binary is the main cause of unequal status for LGBTQ people in Japan (Tanaka, 2006). Classifying people using the idea of sexual orientation and gender identity is based on these two groups of male and female. Therefore, gender binary creates a society that negatively perceives those who do not fit into it, including people who do not identify themselves as heterosexual as well as those whose gender identity does not match their assigned sex at birth.

On the other hand, it is possible for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people to fit themselves into the categories that the gender binary creates if they want (Label X, 2016). It is non-binary individuals that can be distinguished from the other categories of the LGBTQ group in terms of this point. Non-binary individuals represent the people who identify themselves neither as male nor as female, who identify themselves both as male and as female, or who do not categorize themselves in the existing gender groups (Label X, 2016). There are various patterns of how they identify themselves. However, the common thing for non-binary individuals is that they have different gender identities from their biological sex, but they do not have the gender identity “opposite” to it and they are not deciding which they belong to (ibid.). They do not conform to the gender norms which are attached to their sex as well. In other words, non-binary individuals do not identify themselves using the idea of gender binary.

### **Social Elements founded on Gender Binary in Japan**

Gender binary, which is thought to be the cause of unfair situations for LGBTQ people, exists in many aspects in Japanese society. In terms of education, schools in Japan divide students into two groups of boys and girls when they take health and physical education classes. Though some textbooks recently have information about LGBTQ individuals, these texts are often quite limited compared to the information about heterosexuality, which also reinforces ideology based on gender binary and leads to the prejudice that LGBTQ individuals are 'abnormal'. In addition, the education guidelines from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology do not include the teaching about sexual minorities, while it has education about relationships between straight couples (Kashiwazaki, 2020). From these examples, it is clear that society at large and its institutions socialize students to believe gender binary as normal (Sensoy and Diangelo, 2017).

The gender binary also exists in Japanese cultural traditions. It is believed as normal and expected in Japan that a man and a woman should get married and have their own children (Sunagawa, 2018). The Japanese system of marriage is related to this idea, and its marriage law still does not admit any types of marriage other than the ones for a couple of a man and a woman on the family register. The image of an ideal family has a strong impact on Japanese society (Sunagawa, 2018). According to the report from the Economic and Social Research Institute Cabinet Office of Tokyo, Japan, people who have gotten married and have children tend to feel happier than those who do not (Kuwahara, 2017). This is thought to be because they feel that they "belong" to society by following the ideology and what society expects of them, rather than because of an act of getting married and having children. In this point, Sunagawa (2018) mentions that the ideal image of family, which is formed by a heterosexual couple and their children, is strongly connected with the image of people's happiness and their future figures.

Focusing on non-binary individuals, gender roles that exist in various aspects of Japanese society are a problem for them. Though it also bothers straight and cisgender individuals, Label X (2016) mentions that those roles forced by society can be one of the causes to especially make non-binary individuals suffer. Label X (2016) also points out that gender roles can threaten the existence of non-binary individuals. Furthermore, not only invisible things like gender roles, but also material things like daily facilities can be the problems for non-binary individuals. One of these examples is restrooms. They are segregated for men or women, and non-binary individuals have difficulty using these facilities (Miura, n.d.). Non-binary people are forced to endure unjust situations even in their everyday lives because those facilities are constructed without assuming those who do not identify themselves using the frame founded on gender binary.

### **Prejudice against LGBTQ people in Japan**

Gender binary and its socialization through various elements in Japanese society leads to prejudice against LGBTQ people. Firstly, the gender binary supports prejudicial thinking which rationalizes the idea that LGBTQ individuals are not “correct” from a biological point of view. This thinking is based on the idea that they are “wrong” because they cannot have children. However, this idea ignores the fact that biology does not define what is socially accepted to be “wrong” or “correct” (Moriyama, 2017).

Secondly, an analysis of 1000 Japanese people who identify themselves as a minority regarding their sexual orientation or gender identity shows that about 80% of their worries are about their relationships with others, rather than about their being in a minoritized group (Japan Alliance for Legislation to Remove Social Barriers based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, 2019). In addition, according to the report of Amnesty International (2017), 56.1 percent of Japanese LGBTQ individuals who participated in a survey hide their own gender identity or sexual orientation in their workplace, because of the belief that publicly

stating those things can lead to discriminatory actions or losing their job. These surveys show that LGBTQ individuals have to hide their identity because their gender identity or sexual orientation are widely considered to be negative in Japanese society. The problematic result this fact brings is that LGBTQ individuals in the younger generation cannot find role models and learn from the knowledge gained by older groups.

### **Discrimination against LGBTQ people in Japan**

Because Japanese people have been socialized into accepting the gender binary, LGBTQ individuals have been excluded from “normal” society, and discriminatory actions against them have frequently happened. One example is that an accommodation facility in Tokyo rejected a group of homosexuals from using it in 1990 (Kazama and Kawaguchi, 2010). The reason given was that homosexual couples could have sexual relations in the facility, where male users and female users were segregated into different rooms (ibid.). It was thought that this would have a negative effect on the environment for children who also used the facility. This is a discriminatory action of excluding a marginalized group, in this case homosexuals (Sensoy and Diangelo, 2017). What should have been banned was to have sexual relationships inside the facility, not for homosexuals to use the facility (Moriyama, 2017).

Two hotels in Amagasaki city, Hyogo Prefecture also rejected a male couple from staying at either hotel in 2020, although hotels were required by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare to not refuse accommodation for the reason of the customers’ sexuality or sexual orientation (Hanahusa, 2020). These actions show that LGBTQ individuals are ideologically connected to sexual activity, which is considered to be abnormal and often ‘harmful’ for society generally.

In case of non-binary individuals, it happens that they are criticized by those who believe gender binary if they are to have gender reassignment surgery (Label X, 2016). They criticize non-binary individuals changing their appearance by the operation while non-binary

individuals do not have an identity either as a man or woman (ibid). The idea is socialized by gender binary, in this case that how people identify their gender have to match either sex, which is determined by their appearance.

Another example of discrimination is that one member of the House of Representatives said that LGBTQ individuals are not productive for society, which is focusing on their ability to have children (Nikaido, 2018). Furthermore, one city council member in Kanagawa city also tweeted that if ‘abnormal humans’ like them increase, human beings overall would become extinct (Amnesty International, 2017). These are the discriminatory actions of slander against marginalized groups (Sensoy and Diangelo, 2017). The fact that these politicians who were elected by the Japanese public said those things means the political background which allows for discrimination against the LGBTQ individuals will most likely continue.

### **Negative Outcomes for LGBTQ people in Japan**

LGBTQ people’s oppressed status leads to the result that the number of transgenders, homosexuals, and bisexuals who have committed suicide is higher than cisgenders or heterosexuals, which was found from the survey conducted among citizens in Osaka city (Research Team on Diversity of Work and Life, 2020). Furthermore, three problems are pointed out by the survey that conducted research with 2231 LGBTQ individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic ("Press release: Sexual minorities have difficulties", 2020). Firstly, their state of mental health is rapidly getting worse compared to those who are heterosexual and cisgender (ibid.). Secondly, their relationship with family or people close to them is getting worse because LGBTQ people have to stay home with those members even if they do not understand their sexuality (ibid.). Thirdly, the rate of LGBTQ people who work from home is lower than heterosexual and cisgender, because of their higher rate of being non-regular employees who have to travel to a workplace (ibid.). It is considered that this

high rate of non-regular workers is related to social background, which oppresses LGBTQ individuals and as a result they end up with being in an unstable condition in terms of both economic state and mental health (ibid).

In terms of the negative outcomes for transgender people, it happens that they try to or are forced to be “male” or “female” through the gender reassignment surgery (Tanaka, 2006). Additionally, problems for those who have gender reassignment surgery emerge from Japanese transsexual law. In order to have one’s gender status legally changed, it requires someone to have lost their reproductive organs and to have an appearance similar to the “opposite” sex to their original sex. Although the World Health Organization prohibits forcing these two requirements on people, Japanese law still has them (Japan Alliance for Legislation to Remove Social Barriers based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, 2019). In order for them to have an operation, they have to be admitted as a “true” man or woman (Tanaka, 2006). Those requirements contribute to maintaining gender binary and an ideological norm of what a man or a woman should be like (ibid.).

One major problem which is unique to non-binary individuals in Japan is that they are not understood by society. The reason for it is “ambiguity” of their gender identity (Label X, 2016). In this society, which is constructed using gender binary, other LGBTQ individuals including lesbian, gay, transgender and bisexual can fit into this system if they want (ibid.). However, non-binary individuals, who do not categorize themselves as male or female, tend to have difficulty finding where they belong in society (ibid.). There are non-binary individuals who decide to be the “opposite” sex to their sex at birth even when they know that they are not FtM, standing for female to male which means someone whose assigned sex at birth is a female and who has decided to live as a male, or MtF, standing for male to female which means someone whose biological sex is a male and who has lived as a female (ibid). Label X (2016) points out that it is because those non-binary individuals think they



will have inconvenience if they live as neither gender or sex, and are obsessed with the idea that they have to be in either category. They are deprived of the rights to choose their identity related to gender or sex.

### **The Current Situation of Japan**

Through pressure from international organizations, Japan has been required to take some measures against discrimination against SOGI individuals, which stands for sexual orientation and gender identity. SOGI is used together with the acronym LGBT so that it can cover a wider variety of identities of an individual person (Japan Alliance for Legislation to Remove Social Barriers based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, 2019). The United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee asked Japan to enact a law that was related to discrimination against LGBTQ individuals in 2008 and 2014 (ibid.). The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women requested that Japan legislate the policy for LGBT in 2016 (ibid.). The number of recommendations to Japan for improvement of protecting SOGI rights increased from 2006 to 2017 through the process of The Universal Periodic Review (ibid.). Nevertheless, a law for engaging Japanese people to understand the variety of sexual orientation and gender identity, was not submitted to the Japanese diet in 2021. These facts show that Japanese measures to protect human rights, especially the ones for LGBTQ individuals, are not at all enough. Though the acronym LGBTQ is becoming popular and public understanding of this group seems to be increasing in Japan, society which is constructed based on gender binary and internalizes it in people has not changed to protect individuals encompassed by either SOGI or LGBTQ.

### **The Need of Focusing on Non-binary individuals to find the Core of the Problems**

It is clear that lesbian, gay, transgender, and bi individuals have unfair status in various aspects in Japanese society. However, it is possible for them to fit into the existing gender binary system if they wish (Label X, 2016). Moreover, even the general way of talking about

the acronym LGBTQ is following gender binary. It creates the distinction of homosexual and heterosexual inside the idea of sexual orientation, and the distinction of male and female in the idea of gender identity, which groups of people using those four categories. Therefore, it is thought that it is important to focus exclusively on non-binary individuals' approaches when considering the gender binary. Non-binary individuals represent people who have different gender identities from their assigned sex, but they do not have the gender identity "opposite" to it and they have not chosen which sex or gender they belong to (Label X, 2016). In other words, non-binary individuals can be said to be outside of the frames gender binary creates.

In order to see how society can be positively changed, this study focuses on non-binary individuals' perceptions about their social status due to their gender identity. For my research I conducted interviews with participants from a self-help organization for LGBTQ people in Japan. They have made their own community, have consultations, hold events, and do some awareness campaigns. This thesis questions what aspects of Japanese society non-binary individuals think are the least supportive. It also investigates what kind of aspects of their social relationship; family, friends, and schools, for example, determine their social status or how they perceive their situation. It is additionally researched what kind of social ideas non-binary individuals think construct their social status and situation in Japanese society.

### **Methodology**

As the research question involves the study of perceptions of non-binary individuals about their social status and experiences in Japan, it would be necessary to collect data from non-binary individuals who are currently living in Japan.

A social organization for LGBTQ individuals was contacted to recruit potential participants. After explaining my research project and giving guarantees of privacy and security, five participants agreed to participate in the research. The five individuals I

interviewed are all non-binary, who either have or have not made their gender status public. They are all members of the social group for LGBTQ individuals. They are between twenty-five to forty years old. All are Japanese nationals and live in Japan.

As this research project involves the study of gender binary, a social constructivist position has been taken regarding the creation of knowledge and understanding regarding sexuality and gender. Following this, a qualitative methodology has been chosen to better understand individual positions and understanding regarding this topic. Following the social constructive and qualitative approach, it was decided to utilize an interview method to collect data. The interview data collection will allow for more nuanced investigation into the perceptions and beliefs of the research group to emerge.

Participants were interviewed using the online video conferencing platform Zoom. The online interviews were video recorded through Zoom, as well as audio recorded by a smartphone for data collection. The interviews were semi-structured, and after asking questions to set a theme or topic, were allowed to naturally progress into discussion areas of the participants' choosing. Each interview lasted between thirty to forty minutes and all prepared questions were asked to the five interviewees, with follow up questions asked to collect more detailed information. The recordings were all stored on a personal computer and a flash drive both belonging to the researcher. Transcriptions of these recordings were also stored on a personal computer and a flash drive of the researcher. After transcription of the audio into a Microsoft Word document, the text was coded with highlights for emergent themes, topics, and issues. Each theme was given a different highlight color and the document was read several times to ensure that the data was appropriately considered. After coding, data was collected by themes and topics for further analysis.

## **Results**

After finishing data coding, the emergent themes were collated and investigated for relevant points and topics. The following themes were identified among the coded data: 1) relationships non-binary individuals have with the members in their social community, 2) the social structures that have impacts on non-binary individuals, 3) the social ideas or ideology about sex and gender, and 4) how non-binary individuals perceive their social status. Each of these themes will be explored in turn in this section, with attention paid to summaries of participant perspectives and relevant quotes from participants.

### **Relationships Non-binary Individuals have with Members in their Social Community**

The first theme that will be explored is the relationship of non-binary individuals have with the members in their social community. This is about how the interviewees who identify as non-binary individuals are affected when they build a relationship with others and how others communicate with them, both when others knowing and not knowing non-binary individuals gender status. This is to see how people who do not fit into the categories of male nor female tend to be treated by the community in the scale of their daily lives. Many interviewees mentioned that their identity as non-binary individuals had negative impacts on their relationships with people around them including their family members and friends.

Several interviewees discussed how their gender status affected their relationships with their parents or partners, with most saying that it seemed difficult for them to understand it even when they did come out about their gender status. Most interviewees also mentioned that they had difficulties building positive relationships with their friends in their social community. Especially in school, some of them were not able to get along with people around or were bullied. It is also discussed by some interviewees that if people around them judged that they were not like how they were "supposed to be", as either male or female, the relationships with them tended to be negative for non-binary individuals. On the other hand,

some interviewees mentioned that some of their friends, their siblings and their own children accepted their gender status. That is because they had some knowledge or previous experiences having non-binary individuals as friends around them. On the other hand, most participants who mentioned this point said that they were “luckily” accepted by those people around them, as Participant 4 mentioned “[All of my friends whom I told my gender status to] seem to accept it, luckily. And...I thank them for accepting my gender status.”

This theme shows that their gender status tends to have negative impacts on their close relationships in everyday lives. In addition, those who identify as non-binary individuals feel that their gender status is something which is believed to be not normal and therefore should be “accepted” and “understood” by others, even if people around them understand their gender status.

### **Impact of Social Structures on Non-binary Individuals**

The second theme is the social structures that have impacts on non-binary individuals. This is about what kind of facilities or legal systems in the lives of non-binary individuals contribute to maintaining a social structure which they are not able to fit into. This is to see how society is constructed based on gender binary and how it actually works as a social system to determine the gender status of non-binary individuals.

Most interviewees discussed that facilities or legal systems in Japan which do not see people as individuals should be changed. Participant 3, who thinks the restrooms divided into different spaces for male and female should be changed into the space just for an individual, mentioned “I think it is needed to introduce the way to regard people as an individual, not to divide them depending on whether they are male or female.” Participant 4, who wants the family system in Japan based on the family register to be abolished, mentioned “[if the register is abolished,] society would be changed into regarding and respecting people as an individual.” On the other hand, it was found that some of the interviewees thought it would

be almost impossible to completely abolish those social facilities or legal systems where the idea of dividing people into two categories of male and female was embedded.

This theme shows that Japanese society is constructed with the way to group people, including daily things like restrooms or legal systems like family registers which have been founded on the idea of one pair of a man and a woman, while not seeing people as an individual and ignoring those who do not fit into any categories.

### **Social Ideologies Regarding Sex and Gender**

The third theme that will be explored is the social ideologies about gender status. This is about what kinds of ideas in society contribute to maintaining the unfair situation for non-binary individuals. This is to see how people's lives are impacted by gender binary and how it shapes the status of non-binary individuals in Japanese society.

All interviewees mentioned that they have suffered from being categorized as male or female following which sex at birth they had or which gender they "appeared" to be, and from having to pretend to be male or female. At the same time, some interviewees pointed out that they purposely pretended to be male or female so that they could fit into society by being seen as either gender, as Participant 1 mentioned "Wearing a skirt, a dress, and make up and manicuring my own nails are something like an armor and I protect myself by wearing it."

On the other hand, participants tend to feel it is easier to talk about their gender status when someone does not seem to try to make it clear whether the participants are male or female. On this point, Participant 5 mentioned "I did not have so many difficulties [in my high school days] because my friends were kind of people who said 'You are a non-binary individual, so what do you want us to call you in the third person, he or she? Neither of them is appropriate, right?'"

This theme shows that ideologies related to sex and gender make it almost inevitable for people to be categorized into either group of male and female, regardless of whether they want it or not. Additionally, being able to fit in those categories is necessary so that people can be seen as “normal” and that they can spend time without feeling stress caused by their gender status.

### **How Non-binary Individuals Perceive their Social Status**

The fourth theme that will be explored is how non-binary individuals perceive their social status. This is about how non-binary individuals actually feel and think about their social situation. This is to see the perceptions of non-binary individuals toward Japanese society and to find the causes of their unfair situation.

Most interviewees found it difficult to make their gender status public. Moreover, participants even believed that it could not be helped, as Participant 2 mentioned “I really want [people around] to understand my gender status but it is too difficult for them.” Additionally, several interviewees discussed their problems were not particular only to non-binary individuals. They think that the cause is related to more people, as Participant 4 mentioned that abolishing the Japanese family system based on one pair of a man and a woman would be helpful to a wide range of people.

This theme shows that the cause of non-binary individuals’ unfair situation is so deeply embedded in Japanese society that it becomes difficult for them to make their gender status public. In addition, the cause of the problems is so widely prevalent that it impacts not only on non-binary individuals but also on other oppressed groups as well.

Non-binary individuals’ gender status tends to have negative impacts on their close relationships in their everyday lives. Besides, they themselves think that their gender status is “abnormal” and needs to be accepted by others. These situations are likely to happen because they do not fit into either socially constructed categories of male or female. From daily

facilities to legal things, this idea of distinguishing people into two categories exists in many aspects in Japanese society. This ideological thinking makes the situation where being judged by others to fit in those categories is necessary for people so that they can be seen as “normal”, regardless of how they want to identify themselves. This deeply embedded idea works not only to put non-binary individuals on the inferior position, but also to create a situation that negatively impacts on other marginalized groups in Japanese society.

### **Discussion**

There are three questions in this project which investigated how non-binary individuals in Japan perceive their social status and what kind of actions can be taken to positively change their situation.

#### **The Social Ideas or Ideologies that impact the Status of Non-binary individuals**

As for the question about the social ideas that non-binary individuals think impact their social status, the answer is ideological thinking following gender binary, which is prioritized over how non-binary individuals identify themselves.

Non-binary individuals suffer from being categorized as male or female. It also can happen that non-binary individuals pretend to be either one following which sex at birth they have or which gender they “appear” to be. Those issues were raised by the participants during their interviews, and this is evidence of Tanaka’s (2006) mention about gender binary and its influence on Japanese society. Japanese society forces people to be in either the male or female category. It is also quite natural in society to judge others based on whether they are male or female. This judgment is done regardless of how the individual identifies themselves. While the participants have had various experiences of the impact of this classification on their lives, these results clearly show that ideological thinking, which establishes the social norm that there are only two types of sex or gender, makes it difficult for non-binary individuals to spend a life where they feel they are “normal”. It seldom happens in Japan to



see a person as just who they are without trying to judge their gender or sex. It can be said to be the first essential element in various scenes of Japanese society. In order for this, which sex at birth they have or which gender they “appear” to be are the prioritized elements to judge over how they themselves want others to identify them. Therefore, classifying people, which shows the assumption that there are only male or female, serves to create an uncomfortable situation for non-binary individuals. As a result, non-binary individuals actually feel that they are being excluded from society.

In order to change this situation, people should see and treat others as individuals while avoiding identifying them based on what they in a dominant group think who they are. What should be prioritized is how the individuals identify themselves. This action is what people can do in everyday lives, but nothing at a fundamental level will be changed by that. Therefore, the government’s action is also needed to abolish any systems that can rationalize gender binary or do not see people as an individual. The current Japanese marriage system, for example, is one of those systems. It is only applied to and benefits those who have what society expects to be about their gender identity or sexual orientation. In addition, the family register system should be reconsidered for the similar reason. It treats people as one unit which is constituted by one “biological” man and woman on its basis, and therefore can be the reason to exclude people who do not fit into it. Even if it takes time, the government and people in Japan should be aware that any systems and ideas do not adequately work and should not be used as long as it makes unequal situations for someone who does not fit into it.

### **The Systems in Japan which are the Least Supportive for Non-binary Individuals**

As for the systems of Japanese society which non-binary individuals think are the least supportive, it is the ones that divide people into two categories of men and women. As the need to change the social structures or facilities in Japan which require people to be in those categories raised by the participants in their interview, this is evidence of Sunagawa’s (2018)

mention about the impact of the ideology of family within Japan, and Label X's (2016) mention about non-binary individuals' ambiguity as the reason for their not being understood. Prevailing thinking in Japan often regards the family as the primary social unit. This socially expected "correct" form of family is possible only when there is one pair of "man" and a "woman". This clearly internalizes the idea that people have to belong to either group of men or women. While the participants had various opinions on the need and possibility of changing those systems, these results clearly show that gender binary and systems founded on gender binary have a great impact on the unfair situation of non-binary individuals in Japan.

From the systems like the family register to the daily facilities like restrooms, it is the first serious problem for Japanese people that others can judge them as either male or female in order to be admitted as a proper user of those systems. In other words, belonging to Japanese society means not being outside of the two categories of male and female. As a result, non-binary individuals, who do not identify themselves using the two categories, tend to be seen as an ambiguous part of society. This is also evidence of Label X's (2016) mention about lesbian, gay, transgender, and bi individuals being able to fit into these gender categories if they want while non-binary individuals do not. Lesbian, gay, transgender, and bi individuals can do it because it is possible that they are judged either male or female by others or themselves. It therefore stands to reason that every system which groups people according to gender binary is a source of injustice for non-binary individuals.

As some participants mentioned during the interview, it is difficult to completely abolish those systems from Japanese society in the short term. However, it is sure that the systems can be changed even though now it is believed to be normal and important elements of Japanese society. One of the opposite ways of grouping people is seeing them just as an individual. Thus, introducing an idea that regards people as an individual into the daily facilities, which now divide people into two categories depending on gender, can be a

relatively realistic trigger to make the environment for non-binary individuals better. Removing the gender section on job application forms or passports, abolishing the social rules forcing gender norms related to appearances, and introducing work and school uniforms which do not choose who to wear will be the examples of possible instant actions. Additionally, facilities such as schools, supermarkets, and the places which people often visit in their everyday lives can change the restrooms into ones for individual users or introduce restrooms anyone can use.

### **The Relationship Non-Binary Individuals have in their Social Community**

As for the question about relationships in non-binary individuals' social community, their being judged as not belonging to either group of sex or gender determines their unfair situation.

As the difficulty of building a positive relationship with people around them was raised by the participants in their interviews, this is evidence of the analysis by Japan Alliance for Legislation to Remove Social Barriers based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (2019) on LGBTQ people' worries. It is that LGBTQ people tend to feel anxiety about their relationships with others, rather than their identity of being a LGBTQ individual. These results indicate that Japanese people try to judge others whether that person is "normal" when accepting them as one of the community's members. The criterion for that is whether they identify themselves and others can identify them as what they are supposed to be depending on their sex or gender. Looking like a man or a woman, following the role of the gender they are born to be or appear to be, and being categorized as the "same" gender group or "opposite" one, are the essential elements to be judged as a normal community member. It is like a passport to enter a social community.

Additionally, it is found that participants considered being accepted by people around them as a difficult or lucky thing. Participants think that their gender status is something

which is not usual and therefore should be understood by society. This is evidence of internalized oppression (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017). Not only people around them but also non-binary individuals regard themselves and their position as being inferior to the dominant group. They also internalize the idea that being a normal member of the community equals being able to categorize themselves into either group of men or women, without feeling any troubles. It therefore reinforces the unequal situation for non-binary individuals and as a result it is hardly changed in Japan.

Another finding from the interview related to this topic can be the clue to make the personal situation better, however. That is, building positive relationships with people tends to become easier for non-binary individuals when those around them have had previous experiences or knowledge about LGBTQ people. Though having those people is not enough, this can create a big difference in making the situation comfortable for LGBTQ people including non-binary individuals. In order to increase the number of people who properly know about it, governmental actions should be immediately taken so that its education guidelines include subjects about the variety of sexual orientation and gender identity. Not only that, but those subjects should also be equally treated in the textbooks as heterosexual relationships or cisgenderism.

Being socialized to believe gender binary is inevitable as long as someone is living in the current Japanese society. People can even rationalize their discriminatory actions against LGBTQ people including non-binary individuals with their socially constructed knowledge as Moriyama (2017) mentions. However, the change of education will help to make people more or less aware of that fact, and having knowledge about sexual orientation and gender identity will lead to understanding. That will create the environment where LGBTQ people including non-binary individuals can feel safer to communicate with others than the current situation.

### **Unexpected Finding from the Investigation**

It was an unexpected finding that non-binary individuals believed that the cause of their unfair situation was related to social problems of other oppressed groups. Though this idea is easily assumed, participants raised the connection between their issues and other oppressed groups' problems although participants were not asked about this point during their interviews.

As it is already discussed, being able to fit into some social frames decided by social expectations about "what is normal" is a necessary requirement in Japanese society. Dividing people into two sexes or genders is a very basic part of that framing. It is assumed that this classification based on which sex or gender people have is the main cause of non-binary individuals' negative situation in Japan. However, participants mentioned that it was not a problem only for non-binary individuals but also for other marginalized people.

When especially focusing on lesbian, gay, transgender, and bi individuals about this point, gender binary is related to their inferior position. Because their sexual orientation is judged to be "opposite" to heterosexual individuals' orientation, gay and lesbian individuals are seen as "abnormal". Transgender individuals are also seen to be different from normal people because they are generally thought to have the "opposite" gender identity to the sex they are born to be. In both cases, the word "opposite" can be used because there is a distinction of two genders or sexes.

What was investigated in this research was non-binary individuals' perceptions because they are distinguished from LGBT people, who can fit into gender binary. However, it was found that gender binary was related to LGBT people's unjust situation as well because it is the idea to categorize people that makes the situation about sex and gender problematic in Japan. Considering that those categories and how to divide people using them are ideological, not seeing people as an individual can be the cause of social injustice in Japan for

oppressed groups besides non-binary individuals.

### **Limitations and Weaknesses**

There are some limitations in this research. It is possible that participants purposely or even unconsciously chose negative episodes related to their gender status. That is because they were told that the researcher was from the social justice seminar and the researcher apologized to them for asking difficult personal questions during interviews. These may have created the atmosphere which made participants try to find and focus on their negative experiences.

Furthermore, only five interviews were conducted in this research, which is not enough to fully investigate the themes. Each interview lasted for about thirty minutes, which is not long enough to know specifics about the participants' perception of their situation well enough. It also limited the chance for the researcher to ask related questions that could have made what the participants meant clearer or deepened their answers.

### **What has been Found from the Investigation**

Through investigating the perceptions of non-binary individuals in Japan, it is found that gender binary and ideas or social systems founded on it has created an unequal situation for non-binary individuals. In other words, gender binary is one of the cores of the problem. Gender binary has substantial impacts on the aspects of non-binary individuals' lives from their close relationships to the social scale events. In other words, the gender binary's idea of grouping people based on two sexes or genders is embedded in Japanese society in various scenes. Additionally, it has been found that the way of grouping people using gender binary was a common cause of the unfair situation for LGBTQ people as a whole.

It will surely be difficult to abolish gender binary and how it is used in Japanese society in the short term. However, there are actions that Japanese people can take at an individual level, facilities or systems that companies or organizations can introduce, and

social structures or legal elements that the government can change at an institutional level. Only changing one system or idea does not reach the fundamental cause of the current problematic situation. Therefore, it is necessary for Japanese society to understand gender binary's unconscious impact on it. The affected systems in Japanese society should be re-considered, be abolished, and continue to be changed until it becomes the norm to see people as an individual instead of categorizing them. Furthermore, it is necessary for people in Japan to be aware that they have unconsciously regarded gender binary as normal and necessary for society, not because the ideology is naturally and absolutely correct, but because society is constructed based on that ideology in the first place. Japanese society should not rationalize the current situation by raising the ideological reasons that society considers correct, as society is not constructed assuming the existence of the oppressed groups.

### **Conclusion**

“They called me ‘*seibetsu fumei*’ (性別不明) and I feel this was the worst nickname in my life.” This is a quote from one of the participants in the interview. *Seibetsu fumei*, meaning a person whose gender or sex others feel cannot judge, impressively represents how powerful impact gender binary has in Japanese society. Which gender or sex people are categorized as should always be clear, and people have to “appear” as either men or women depending on those categories. If not, it means someone is seen as abnormal. This is part of the reason why non-binary individuals are in an inferior position in Japanese society, whose various social systems are founded on this idea.

The gender binary creeps into our lives at an unconscious level and as a result Japanese people believe it is normal and a needed standard. Focusing especially on non-binary individuals' perspectives makes that fact clear. Additionally, it was found that

categorizing people using gender binary was also related to the cause of the unjust status the oppressed groups besides non-binary individuals have.

For many people in Japan, the researcher included, it will be difficult to interact with others without trying to know that person's gender or sex. However, if it comes to be seen as less important and social systems are changed to see people as individuals, that will work to realize justice not only for non-binary individuals but also for other oppressed groups related to gender issues and sexual orientation. People should consciously try not to be caught up with the way of thinking founded on gender binary. In addition to that, the chance to know about alternatives to the way of thinking based on gender binary should be widely given to Japanese people. People in the majority group always have to reconsider whether their actions toward others are forcing what society thinks as "normal". It may seem bothersome for those in the majority. However, there is no rational reason for ignoring the social groups who are now oppressed due to socially constructed ideas, which the majority feels comfortable with. Gender binary is regarded as normal, not because it is naturally and definitely correct, but because society is structured based on that ideology.

Individual actions are not enough, and organizational or governmental actions are absolutely necessary to fundamentally abolish this ideology from society. However, the impact of gender binary was already identified by other researchers, and the result given by this research ended up supporting that conclusion. While this is not a new recommendation, the situation in Japan has not seemed to improve. Therefore, this fact and this research shows the need to consider more about the realistic and instant actions that these organizations can take immediately. In advance of this big change, if the number of people increase who consciously avoid categorizing people into the two types of sex or gender and try to simply see them as a human, it will work effectively enough as a trigger to make big institutions move to make a more equal society.



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