

Calls for same-sex marriage legalization growing

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TOKYO (Kyodo) -- Calls are growing in Japan for same-sex marriage to be legalized so such couples can enjoy the same benefits that heterosexual couples do.

While six local governments currently recognize same-sex partnerships, ensuring couples the same treatment and entitlement to local services as married couples, most still face discrimination when searching for public housing, visiting a critically ill partner in hospital or inheriting property on the grounds that they are not family.

The U.S. Supreme Court recognized same-sex marriage as legal and deemed state-level bans unconstitutional in 2015, while the constitutional court of Taiwan ruled this year that the Civil Code, which stipulates that marriage is the legal union between a man and a woman, is unconstitutional.

"Among the Group of Seven industrialized nations, only Japan has not yet introduced a same-sex marriage or same-sex partnership system at the state level," said Ken Suzuki, a law professor at Meiji University. "It is a shared awareness among advanced nations that excluding same-sex couples from the legal marriage framework constitutes discrimination against lesbians and gays."

Suzuki, who is also a professor emeritus at Hokkaido University in Sapporo, is gay and played an active role in campaigning for such system in the major northern city.

Sapporo now officially recognizes same-sex partnerships between lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender couples. The city also certifies partnerships between heterosexual couples with gender-identity disorder.

Suzuki said he had not necessarily taken a positive stance toward introducing same-sex marriage "as I

have a negative image against marriage itself," referring, for example, to the "unfair" institution of women taking the surname of the husband in most cases in Japan.

Still, he said, the introduction of a same-sex partnership system in Sapporo and other municipalities, including the Tokyo wards of Setagaya and Shibuya, combined with legalization of same-sex marriage in other countries, "have brought about positive knock-on effects to society."

Such moves have raised public awareness about LGBT rights and contributed to changing discriminatory attitudes, while helping raise LGBTs' self-esteem, he said. "The existence of LGBTs had been ignored, but these developments have gradually led the public to recognize us."

Underpinning his comments, several cellphone operators, life insurers as well as hospitals treat same-sex couples as family, while the city of Osaka officially recognized two men as foster parents this year.

Suzuki also believes the introduction of same-sex partnerships or marriage will be the first step toward changing the conventional family system and generating "diversified forms of family."

"As same-sex couples do not bear biological children," their partnership will prompt changes in the concept that men and women marry and give birth to save their family names, he said.

"Also, it could be accepted that elderly people, regardless of their gender, live together as a family and take care of each other by, for example, signing a letter of consent for surgery or inheriting properties of their partners," he added.

Takeshi Shiraishi, a public school teacher in Tokyo who has lived with his male partner for 25 years, agreed.

Shiraishi said in the past he and his partner were charged double when renting an apartment as they were not considered family, adding, "We could not apply for a bank loan when we bought a house."

"We hope we can continue living together in peace...," Shiraishi told a recent symposium in Tokyo. "In that case, we expect the remaining survivor to legally maintain what we have generated together...It is an issue regarding the constitutionally guaranteed equality before the law."

The symposium, organized by the Japan Federation of Bar Associations, drew more than 100 people and was broadcast in several cities through the JFBA network.

Shiraishi, who is in his late 40s, said he had been hesitant to come out to his parents and his colleagues, but decided to join the event "as I want people to know that we are here, and I want to be a

role model for young people."

Aya Kamikawa, a Setagaya Ward assembly member who worked for introducing the same-sex partnership system there, said legalization of same-sex marriage was realized in most countries after local governments had recognized such couples.

"The development in six municipalities in Japan is expected to advance to the next stage at the state level," said Kamikawa, a transgender woman. "The legal system, including marriage, should be equally open to everyone, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. Everyone should be guaranteed the equal right of choice, otherwise it would be discriminatory."

For those working to improve LGBT rights, a recent remark by senior lawmaker Wataru Takeshita of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party that same-sex partners of state guests should not be invited to banquets hosted by Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko came as a shock.

Takeshita was reported as saying he is opposed to having same-sex partners at the banquet table with the imperial couple because it "doesn't fit with Japan's tradition."

"Mr. Takeshita may not be able to assume that there are LGBTs in Japan," said Suzuki. "He may not be able to assume it is possible that a Japanese prime minister may bring a same-sex partner to a banquet some day."