

For LGBTQ+ people in Mongolia, stigma is a fact of life

Erdene shares her story of coming out in Mongolia

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A rainbow flag outside the Great Khural, Mongolia's parliament building, Ulaanbaatar, March 2019. Photo (c): [The LGBT Centre Mongolia](#). Used with permission.

During the summer of 2017, I spent some months in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia's capital city. There, I met a young woman in her second year of university, who told me about the difficulties of being an LGBTQ+ person in the country. I was immediately struck by the gravity of some of the situations she portrayed. Although she was only 19 years old, she had already faced such discrimination herself. I knew that she would have valuable insight into what younger members of the country's LGBTQ+ community were going through.

Mongolia is a country with a history of discrimination against LGBTQ+ people. Even though laws exist to protect them, it is not uncommon to read reports of bisexual and homosexual people who have been beaten, raped, or even kidnapped by hate groups. There are some cautious signs of change. At the end of last year, [police brought charges](#) against a far-right group after an attack on a transgender sex worker, in a rare case of the authorities investigating an anti-LGBTQ+ hate crime.

So, when I suggested that I interview her, she responded that she had to think about it. She was scared that having her name out could put her and her relatives in danger. Eventually, she accepted: the silence had to be broken. She just had two requests: that I would conceal her real identity, and that I would let some time pass before publishing her words.

In 2020, we decided that three years were a period long enough. And to honour her request regarding her identity, I decided to give her the pseudonym of Erdene, which means “jewel” in Mongolian. The interview has been edited for brevity and style.

“I had many problems related to my sexual orientation”, Erdene began.

“In Mongolia sexual discrimination doesn’t always hit you directly. People don’t really understand when you speak about ‘sexual orientation’. If I had to tell the average Mongolian that I’m bisexual, they would be like: ‘Oh... Ok’. They wouldn’t react either positively or negatively. Because they wouldn’t understand. But if I showed it with my actions – *that* would make them surprised”.

Amedeo Bastiano: How would they react?

Erdene: If you are a girl and you walk hand in hand with another girl, people will just think that you two are friends. No one would suspect you’re a couple. But you would never kiss another girl in public. If you did, people might insult you and yell at you. Especially the elderly and the conservative. Most likely, somebody would approach you and make you stop.

It happened to a friend of mine. She and another girl were dating; once, they went to a park and started kissing. Two guys approached them, saying: ‘Hey, what are you doing?! You both should be kissing guys. Why are you kissing each other?’ Then they forced my friend and the other girl to stop.

People react more strongly to males. If two guys hold each other’s hands, other people would beat them up. That’s not uncommon.

AB: Is there any community which provides support to LGBTQ+ people in Mongolia?

E: Yes, there is a small community, a small LGBT centre, and it’s trying to get its voice heard. I joined it. We have a pride march, a pride week and so on... But

only a few people participate. Last time [in 2017], at the pride walk, there were fewer than 50 of us. There is no media coverage; almost nobody knows that such events take place. And when people don't speak about our activities, the impact of what we do fades away quickly. Many don't even know that an actual LGBTQ+ centre exists. The people who 'work' there are all volunteers. They get a very small fraction of tax money, because they are registered as a non-profit organisation.

AB: So, its volunteers are not paid by the government – or not directly. How is the LGBT centre seen by state institutions?

E: Not positively. Mongolia is officially a democracy, and as a democracy it is obliged to defend people's rights – LGBTQ+ ones included. Our ability to have a community, to be heard, and so on. But in reality, politicians don't like us. Regardless of their party. They don't have any interest in protecting us. So they keep silent and hinder any possible change. The centre had to fight really hard to get the small governmental help it now receives. And that took about five years.

Sexual discrimination is a crime under Mongolian law. Harming people because of their sexual orientation or sexual identity [should] involve severe punishments. But this remains a dead letter: everyone ignores the law. If you call the police saying that you've been discriminated against, no one will come. And many people – many cops as well as many LGBTQ+ people – don't even know that such a law exists.

AB: Why are people so uninformed?

E: There are many reasons. The first is the obstructionism of politics; right after come money and fear.

Lately, there have been many new young people visiting the centre. They were 16 to 18 years of age. And they all lamented that they couldn't retrieve details about the centre anywhere.

Let's imagine that someone gets harassed or discriminated against. That person won't know where to turn to. It's just impossible to find something saying: 'If you are in a difficult situation, call this number, or go to this place'. There's not even a panel, nor a flyer. When people get harassed, they will most likely be alone, *feel* alone, and will have to bear their suffering in silence, without the possibility to find comfort and help. They'll probably continue to face

discrimination for a long time without seeing any possibility to improve their condition.

This is because those who run the centre don't do enough advertising. It's not their fault, though. They don't have enough money to print things out. And on the internet, despite them having a Facebook page and all that, people are afraid of having their name associated with the centre. Members of the community don't want to share links, send e-mails, or invite their friends to events. Because they don't want to be discriminated against. Or discriminated against even more. Those who run the centre do what they can. They work really hard. But after all, there's only four of them. You cannot ask too much of four people who work as volunteers. The possibilities are limited.

AB: How big is the LGBT community in Mongolia?

E: Officially the community has between 300 and 500 members. But there are way more LGBTQ+ people in Mongolia. Way more. There has been a survey, and it showed around 30,000 people across the country. But even those who organised that survey know that the real number is much higher. People just don't talk. Of all the Mongolians I directly or indirectly know, I can recall less than 10 people who fully came out, including public figures. And now that I think about it, they are all women. Not a single man admitted to be gay.

AB: Given how difficult the situation in Mongolia is for LGBTQ+ people, why did you decide to come out?

E: I made this choice because of a friend. In the past, she had a girlfriend with a masculine appearance: she looked like a guy. A gay guy, maybe. She was beaten up twice just because of how she looked.

One time was on the streets at night. The other time was at an LGBTQ+ party. Sometimes we organise parties in the city. They are private events: we prepare a list, and only members of our community who register in advance are admitted. When this girl was beaten, there were three people waiting for us outside the place where we held the party. They tried to get inside the venue, but when they approached the entrance, the bouncer told them: 'You cannot enter. There's an LGBT party going on'. So they decided to wait for somebody to exit. He should have said: 'Sorry, this is a private event', and nothing else. But he decided to be specific.

He did it on purpose. By telling those three what was going on inside the place, he facilitated the situation. If you work in security, you should be able to tell at

first sight when a group of jerks wants to get into a fight, right? You don't give them a reason. Plus, when the three guys started hitting the girl – who was a customer of the venue he was working at – he didn't lift a finger. He *wanted* her to be beaten.

Those three knew she was a girl. When they started, my friend told them. They could understand that from her voice. But they didn't care. They just wanted to beat her. They felt justified by the fact she looked like a male, so they could get violent. That made me understand what discrimination can lead to. And that awareness is why I'm open about my orientation. I am open, because nobody [else] is. Because if nobody speaks out about the situation, nobody will know. And I want people to know. I want people in this society, especially people my age, to know and to start accepting those who are different.

AB: How did the people close to you react when you opened up about your orientation?

E: I lost a few friends after saying that I am bisexual. Both male and female friends. But I'm actually happier. It's better to have friends who accept you for what you are, than fake friends who will always be ready to turn their backs on you. My mother knows; my father doesn't. But here in Mongolia, almost nobody tells their parents. LGBTQ+ people never speak – not even with close friends. They open up only with other members of the community.

When your parents discover your orientation, you almost always have a hard time. I have a direct example of this. I know another girl. Her parents knew she was engaged to someone of the same sex... But not because she told them. They got some clues, read a few messages... When they realised, they cut her internet connection, took her phone and her notebook, and forced her to stay home for two weeks. Then, they made her break up with her girlfriend. This is the typical situation young LGBTQ+ people go through in Mongolia.

For me, it was different. My mother studied abroad, and is a very informed, open-minded person. One time, she asked me if I was happy with the person I was dating. She probably suspected that I was seeing a girl. I said that yes, I was. The only thing she answered me was: 'If you're happy, do anything you want. I accept you, I love you, and will accept and love you no matter what. If you're happy, I'm happy too'. That's extremely rare here.

My mother made me understand how big the impact of your parents can be. How important it is to have their love, how much they can influence your happiness. If it wasn't for her, I would have felt much more alone and isolated.

AB: Do you think there's any chance for the situation to improve, in the future?

E: In Mongolia, plenty of people still think that homosexuality is a mental illness. When they find out that someone is gay or lesbian, they are disgusted, and will look for a way to cure the person.

Sometimes, Western people see being bisexual as better than being lesbian, because you still 'like the opposite sex'. But here, it's more the fact that you're attracted by the same one. People think that if you're not 100 percent straight, you're not able to feel love like 'normal people'. They don't believe you are able to have regular emotions, control over your sexuality, or a normal relationship. They think you cannot by any means be faithful.

The situation is getting better. The number of subscriptions to the LGBTQ+ centre is rising, especially among young people. We're getting more visibility, and some foreign [LGBTQ+] centres are promoting our image abroad. Moreover, many Mongolians are now moving to other countries to study or work, and there, they can embrace a more tolerant point of view, like my mother.

But changes need time. That's why I want to leave: I'm proud of being Mongolian, but I cannot constantly be crushed by the hatred of my society.

Editor's note: The LGBTQ Centre Mongolia was not involved in the production of this article