TOKYO — In a brightly decorated studio in central Tokyo on a recent day, Matsuko Deluxe, a co-host of the television magazine show “Crazy About 5 p.m.,” was surprised to learn of a smartphone app that alerts users before they’re likely to need to go to the bathroom.

A colleague ripped into Deluxe for being so technologically clueless.

“Are you making fun of me?” squawked Deluxe, who was wearing a voluminous peach-colored dress. “You pig!”

One thing made this show stand out: Matsuko Deluxe is a plus-size, gravelly-voiced, gay, cross-dressing commentator who has become a huge celebrity in Japan, a country not exactly known for being an easy place to be gay.

But these days, it’s hard to turn on the television in Japan without seeing Matsuko Deluxe. He appears on shows on various channels almost every night and is in ads for Toyota and NTT, a major telecom company.
And he’s not alone. **Mitz Mangrove** is another gay, cross-dressing television celebrity, a star who trades on flamboyance. He’s not without qualms; perpetuating stereotypes, he concedes, may not be the best way to bring homosexuality into the mainstream.

Japan’s is a traditional society. The “Japanese dream” revolves around education, lifetime employment and marriage.

In surveys, about 5 percent of Japanese people say they are gay or lesbian, although it’s not clear how many of them are openly so. Many people do not come out because of the discrimination that ensues.

“You get a job offer only to be rejected once your company learns you are a sexual minority,” said Maki Muraki, the openly lesbian leader of **Nijiiro (Rainbow) Diversity**, an Osaka-based nonprofit that promotes LGBT equality in the workplace.

“At work, you get bullied by your seniors and fired, maybe for indirect reasons like not following office regulations by having hair that’s too long,” Muraki said, estimating that only 10 percent of LGBT Japanese have come out to their families and even fewer are openly gay at work.

But while Japan does not appear to be on the cusp of the kind of sea change that has occurred in the United States in recent years, society is slowly changing.

Shibuya, a ward of central Tokyo, is planning to start allowing same-sex unions this summer, and the Setagaya ward and the city of Yokohama are also moving in the same direction. A recent poll by the left-leaning Asahi found that 52 percent of respondents approved of same-sex marriage.

Still, there is plenty of resistance.

Shinzo Abe, the conservative prime minister whose wife, Akie, took part in an LGBT pride parade last year, said that the Japanese constitution “does not recognize marriage between people of the same sex.”
The issue is "related to the foundation of the shape of family in our country, and it requires an extremely cautious consideration," he said in the Diet last month.

Article 24 of Japan’s Constitution states that “marriage shall be based only on the mutual consent of both sexes” and is often interpreted as banning same-sex unions.

But celebrities like Matsuko Deluxe, who’s 42, might be helping to break down some of barriers for LGBT Japanese.

As he recorded for “Crazy About 5 p.m.” on a recent day in a studio with a huge window onto the street, a dozen or so fans stood outside to watch, some whispering “Matsuko, Matsuko” and giggling.

One of them, 26-year-old Saki Kamizato, had taken the day off from work as an office clerk so that she could be at the studio by the time the show started.

“I like Matsuko because he’s critical and has a sharp tongue and bluntly says things that we can’t say,” she said as she watched the show going on. A mother watched with her toddler, while a couple of salarymen also hung about.

“He has a venomous tongue, but it never comes across as too mean,” added Kiyomi Nagashima, a 49-year-old homemaker who’d also come to peer through the window.

“I don’t know anyone who dislikes him.”

The fact that he is gay and dressed as a woman was neither here nor there, she said.

“His existence is beyond a realm of gender,” she said. “I want him to become someone like a governor and represent us.”

But even Matsuko Deluxe, whose agent declined an interview, never came out to his parents.

“They asked me a few times, ‘Are you okay?’ but somehow I avoided answering,” he said on an NHK program a couple of years ago.

His mother let him know she’d figured it out by sending him a letter saying she’d watched one of his shows, and would be watching again. In fact, his mother’s only complaint is about his weight, he said.

There is a boom in “onee” stars, Mitz Mangrove said, using the Japanese word that refers to men who speak like women and are often gay or transgender, and they are
treated like weirdos or eccentrics.

“We fit in a category of being obviously atypical or unusual,” he said as he was having his make-up fixed after the “It’s Noon” lunchtime variety show. They are encouraged to be outlandish or outspoken to spice up TV shows, and that’s why there are no openly gay people in more mainstream roles on television, he said.

“We are not treated as human beings. We are okay as long as we say things that are not mainstream or that are sharp or vulgar,” Mangrove said.

For that reason, it wasn’t necessarily a good thing for “ordinary gay people” to be associated with cross-dressing celebrities like them.

“They might be treated as abnormal as that’s the common idea about us in the TV world,” Mitz Mangrove said. “There are many gay people who are boring, not social or don’t drink alcohol in this world but our society doesn’t accept that fact and I find that very uncomfortable.”

Japanese society is “confused” with what to make of these television personalities, said Aya Kamikawa, a representative on the Setagaya council and Japan’s first transgender assembly member.

“I don’t oppose the idea that they are selling their sexuality as their appeal,” she said of the TV hosts. “But in reality, sexual minorities are everywhere, they can be your colleagues, friends and relatives. Right now, they’re seen as people to be laughed at or be consumed. It’s grossly lopsided.”

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