

Japanese Transgender Politician Is Showing 'I Exist Here'

By [MOTOKO RICH](#) MAY 19, 2017



Tomoya Hosoda, a transgender councilman in Iruma, Japan, said he hoped to make an important contribution simply by being public and confident about his identity. Jérémie Souteyrat for The New York Times

IRUMA, Japan — In addition to his name and title, the business card of Tomoya Hosoda, a city councilman in a suburb of Tokyo, bears a unique description.

“Born a woman,” it reads.

Mr. Hosoda, 25, won his seat on the City Council in conservative-leaning Iruma in March, becoming the first openly transgender male elected to public office in Japan and one of only a handful around the world.

Japan has not experienced the kind of transgender moment that has swept the United States, where the politics of sexual identity have convulsed [schools](#), [popular culture](#) and [big-time sports](#) in recent years.

The appearance of transgender Japanese television stars may convey the illusion of a culture at ease with gender fluidity. But this is a country where transgender people must be labeled as having a mental disorder in order to legally transition from one sex to the other, and where transgender people can struggle to rent apartments, obtain medical care or hold jobs.

Mr. Hosoda thinks that in his small way, he can make an important contribution simply by being public and confident about his identity, particularly for young people who may be confused about their own.

“I wanted to show children in elementary or junior high school that I exist here,” he said in an interview in the Iruma office of the Democratic Party, which Mr. Hosoda represents on the Council. “I strongly felt that way, and that’s why I entered politics.”

Mr. Hosoda himself benefited from the activism of Japan’s only other transgender politician, Aya Kamikawa, who has sat on the council in Setagaya, a ward of Tokyo, for 14 years.

Ms. Kamikawa, a transgender woman, lobbied for a change in Japan’s [law](#) to allow transgender people to officially change their gender on the all-important family registry certificate that every Japanese citizen must hold, and that is often needed to rent an apartment or receive medical care or other services.

Under that law, only people who have received a diagnosis of “gender identity disorder” and have undergone sexual reassignment surgery may legally change their gender. Activists say the law makes it difficult for those who are transitioning or do not want surgery to live or work as the gender with which they identify and often leads to discrimination by those who

recognize only biological gender.

In Mr. Hosoda's case, growing up as a girl named Mika in Iruma she never met anyone who was transgender and did not even know it was possible to transition from female to male.

All she knew was that she did not feel like a girl. She hated being forced to wear a skirt as part of her uniform in high school. When it came time for her coming-of-age ceremony at age 20, she balked at having to wear a feminine kimono.

Through an internet connection, she met a man who had transitioned from a woman, opening her eyes to the possibility of another life path. This mentor encouraged her to come out to her parents.

Anxious about how they would respond, she wrote a letter and handed it to her mother in the parking lot of a supermarket. She feared that if she handed over the letter at home, she would just run to her room rather than face her mother's reaction.

Mr. Hosoda, who was then studying to be a medical technician, recalled that after his mother read the letter, the first words out of her mouth were "I'm so sorry." She was devastated to learn that her daughter had been suffering in silence for so long, and wanted to offer her child her full support as daughter transitioned to son.

In 2014, Mr. Hosoda underwent sexual reassignment surgery, which allowed him to convert his gender on his official family register.



Aya Kamikawa, center, a transgender councilwoman in a Tokyo ward, in 2003. She lobbied for a change in Japanese law to allow transgender people to change their gender on their family register. Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

By the time he decided to run for office, he felt comfortable going public with his identity, although his appearance could have allowed him to disguise his past. With his carefully mounded, close-cropped hairstyle, black-and-silver wire glasses and hints of a beard, he resembles many other men in their 20s in Tokyo.

His campaign brochures noted prominently that he is a transgender man, and he advocated a platform of embracing diversity, not just for sexual minorities but also for the elderly, children and people with disabilities.

Mr. Hosoda did not experience any discrimination during the campaign, he said. He squeaked onto the Council, receiving the second-fewest votes among the 22 members elected.

In Iruma, Shinji Sugimura, director of the local chapter of the Democratic

Party, said Mr. Hosoda had succeeded because “he didn’t push his thoughts to others but tried to be understood first.”

“He’s good as a politician rather than an activist,” Mr. Sugimura added.

Ms. Kamikawa, who recalls being harassed during her first run for office 14 years ago, said she was heartened that Mr. Hosoda had not faced the kind of attacks she had. Some people hurled epithets, she said, and others asked, “What kind of parents raised someone like you?”

Some transgender activists say that even as Japanese society has grown more superficially accepting of transgender people, many hurdles remain.

People who prefer not to risk surgery for health reasons or who are still in the process of changing their biological sex live in a limbo where they are not allowed to live as they choose.

“When someone points out that their appearance doesn’t match their official family register, they need to explain themselves each time,” said Yuka Tateishi, a lawyer who is representing a transgender woman fighting for the right to use the bathrooms that correspond to her gender identity at work.

Takamasa Nakayama, founder of a transgender support organization in Japan, said some people had been fired after coming out.

“Sometimes they are discriminated against because their appearance is changing,” Mr. Nakayama said. “If you are not strong enough, it’s hard to keep a full-time job and survive the bullying.”

Japanese national health insurance does not cover gender reassignment surgery or hormone therapy, and there are few doctors in Japan with such expertise. And the Education Ministry recently declined to add content about transgender issues to its curriculum for kindergarten and elementary and junior high schools, arguing that such discussions would be “difficult ”

because of challenges in “achieving the understanding of parents and the public.”

In Iruma, Mr. Hosoda said he hoped to establish a counseling service at City Hall where teenagers grappling with their gender identity could seek guidance. He noted that the suicide rate among such teenagers was three to four times as high as it was for those who were not questioning their gender identity.

Even if Mr. Hosoda mainly focuses on the bread and butter of public life, like making sure the streetlights work, experts on gender issues in Japan say he could be a potent symbol.

“If the only openly transgender people on television are entertainers, the public is being presented with a very skewed version of reality which may not contribute to broader acceptance,” said Gill Steel, associate professor at Doshisha University. “Hopefully, politicians who are transgender and are simply doing a good job in the public eye will increase mainstream tolerance.”

Above all, said Mr. Hosoda, in a society that values conformity, “I want to give a message that you are O.K. the way you are.”

He added, “You don’t have to make yourself or put yourself into a certain mold.”