WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY
INTERVIEWS

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An Interview with K

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Hongdae Toz, Seoul, Korea

K: My name is K. I have been a member of the *Lesbian Counseling Center in South Korea* since 2003. At that time the organization's official name was *Korean Women Sexual Minorities Human Rights Group Kirikiri*, but it changed its name in 2005. Our activity is mainly focused on counseling—by email, phone or face-to-face—and we also participate in collective actions with other sexual minority groups. I was actually preparing for tomorrow's regional elections at an activist collective called *Mujigae Haengdong* [Rainbow Action] just before I came here.

Carlos Motta: What is the platform that allows for an organization like *Kirikiri* to be formed? How does it fit in within the Korean society's regard of lesbian issues?

K: In 1993 lesbian and gay activists co-founded *Chodong-hoe*, but it soon separated in two: the gays formed *Chingusai* (Korean Gay Men's Human Rights Group) and the lesbians formed *Kirikiri*. There were mainly two reasons for this division. The first one was a sort of a relational dissension between us: the gay activists weren't very, so to speak, equaled minded to lesbian activists. For example, if a woman activist smoked during a meeting, they would say, "How dare you smoke in front of us?" Just like any other Korean man would to younger women. The second reason was the difference between gay issues and lesbian issues. It was a time when people treated Aids as a homosexual disease, and "homosexual" usually was understood as gay. To gay activists the important agenda was to inform the public that this wasn't true, and to prevent Aids within the community. In other words, gay sexuality itself was quite in the open even then, and actual campaigns followed... But lesbian sexuality wasn't even visible. For instance, and this is still a common case, a man married to a lesbian would call us and say: "I'm bearing her just because she is having an affair with a woman; if it were a man I wouldn't be holding back..." People didn't take lesbians seriously.

CM: What has it traditionally meant to be a woman in Korea and what does it mean to be a lesbian woman within that tradition?

K: Not only did women have less education or work opportunities than men, but they also suffered from a double standard regarding sex. It is the same problem that the western society went through, but only more intensified, *Koreanized*. All women were compelled to be the mother figure, at home and at work, to take care of people and perform emotional labor. After getting married, they would hear people saying: "Stay at home with your husband, don't come out and mingle with other men—to them, people outside are all men—

at work." But men would also think that they can have sex with any woman they want, whenever they feel the need, despite the woman's will. So on the one hand, women were treated as beings that do not and should not have any desire for sex; and on the other hand, as beings that are always sexually available. The male-centered model of sexuality objectified them. In these circumstances, the idea that women can desire women, that women can love without men was simply impossible to imagine. Before the so-called "Ivan Censorship," they regarded girls holding hands, hugging, sitting on other's laps as expressing profound friendship.

A common joke in the sexual minority community is that the richest in Korea are gay couples, the second richest are heterosexual couples, and lesbian couples are last in the list. Women are more vulnerable to poverty; and when it comes to lesbian women, economic and social disadvantages become much harsher. Gay men with a certain social status—this shouldn't be generalized but in some cases it is quite true—can create a heterosexual family while having an alternative way to live their sexuality. However it is much more difficult for lesbian women to act freely once they enter the marriage system. Gender and social class are not two distinct spheres.

CM: Here is a two-part question: Can you tell me about feminism in Korea? How it has established itself in regards to the issues that you are mentioning? And what is the relationship between feminism and lesbianism, which is often a struggle in some countries.

K: I can't possibly cover all of the feminist movement of Korea, but I will do my best. But beforehand, I should explain my position. I entered one of the most respected colleges of Korea in 2000, and I have seen with my own eyes the accomplishments of the feminist movement that flourished in the 1990s. I learned the latest discourses amongst many feminists; my course to being a feminist was a very happy one. So the feminism I can talk about is extremely limited, solely based on my own experience. I can't cover the experiences of a high school graduate woman, nor that of a physically challenged woman, or that of an immigrant woman. But at the same time, I am a lesbian activist, which pushes me out of the mainstream and in to the sub-stream. I hope you understand my background...

The feminism I grew up with was an extension of the 1980-90s movement. It was a time when domestic and sexual violence, being a big social issue, were defined, and special acts considering these two, plus the "Prostitution Special Act," were legislated. The primary activity of the feminist groups then was counseling through the *Korea Women's Hotline*, the *Korea Sexual Violence Relief Center*, etc. Meanwhile, campus society aimed at problems such as sexual assaults caused by faculty members. Being part of these movements, I learned to listen to the victims, which formed the foundation of my current activities.

Actually, I was involved in student activist movements before I became a feminist activist. But the student society was also indifferent to feminism; so far as several rape incidents took place among the so-called "progressive" figures, followed by the usual denial. On this account, the *Committee of 100* was organized. I realized that feminism can bring to surface silenced voices, voices inaudible even in the progressive camp. I was very enthusiastic; but even there lesbianism never became a subject. Everybody was talking about their boyfriends and about sexual assaults limited to the ones by men… I came to know that this

frame couldn't be broken, so I began to search outside the campus.

I was in a relationship with a woman—the first serious lesbian relationship I had—and she introduced me to *Kirikiri.* I immediately became a part of *Kirikiri:* I worked as a paid activist at *Kirikiri* but I have mostly been a volunteer activist. But two events made me part with mainstream feminism for good. There was a group run by, so to speak, the older generation of feminists called the *Women's Foundation of Korea*, which raised funds and gave financial support to feminist groups. *Kirikiri* always applied for the funding but never received any and we couldn't really understand why. Finally we were admitted, but not after long we found out that our funding was the remainders, just scraps of other funds, given to us just so that we would keep quiet. So we boycotted the funds; after this fight lesbian organizations were treated fairly.

The second event considers the Hoju scheme [Hoju, the literal meaning being 'head of the family', refers to the patriarch, usually the father and if none, the eldest son. The Hoju scheme was the family register system of Korea until 2008, in which the family members were registered in subordination to the patriarch.] I participated as a representative of *Kirikiri* in the collective group that acted against the Hoju scheme, and discussed the alternative register system. I persisted the idea that the system should not be only individualized, but also non-heterosexualist, and that moreover it should consider single parent households. But the older generation of feminists objected, saying that this would dismiss the abolition itself and throw our past efforts out of the window, and if it did, it would all be our fault. I was dumbfounded, but had to compromise. The feminists that fought vigorously in the 1980-90s themselves had transformed into the narrow-minded heterosexualists that can no longer be looked up to. This feminism has become something that queer activists have to, not adopt, but fight against.

CM: Can you identify the most pressing issues that concern you as a feminist and as a lesbian?

K: Visibility. People still don't know what lesbianism or being a lesbian is. We have to present ourselves to them: "Me standing in front of you, here, at this moment, I am a lesbian." If coming out on TV is too much, then come out on the radio; write articles, even if anonymously; give lectures, do street campaigns… We tell people that there are lesbians right amongst the people they meet every day. I sometimes ask: "Am I the first lesbian that you've ever seen in your life?" I think this is the most important process.

Nevertheless quite a few gay characters appear on public broadcasts or movies. Yet, the media images are too idealized, and can have negative effects. But lesbians are not even recognized. While watching *Life is beautiful* [A weekend primetime TV drama broadcasted in 2010 by SBS. Among the main characters were a gay couple, probably the first fixed homosexual characters to appear on a family TV series in Korea], I thought: "Wow, that's great. But when's our turn?" The lesbians that I first met at *Kirikiri*, those wearing leather pants and silver chains, short hair cuts, big and sturdy, those that I love but the society shuns: when will these women come out naturally on TV series? It is not that they represent the general lesbian, but that they really are there, and therefore deserve to be on those shows.

CM: What are the tactics and strategies that you are employing to address those issues?

K: *Kirikiri's* changing its name to the *Lesbian Counseling Center in South Korea* was a part of our strategy. When it was the one and only lesbian organization in Korea, counseling was obligatory. We were no psychotherapists, but we received calls and responded to letters, telling them: "I'm a lesbian too, and I understand what you're going through." Counseling is our field, our practice. We thought that by changing our name to a more evident one, those who need help will be able to approach us more easily. Our efforts are still on going. To enhance the quality, we are expanding our channels and systematizing legal and medical supports; we are also campaigning to gain more publicity. In the long run, we are trying to construct a certain framework based on the real lives of Korean lesbians. Rather than importing foreign discourses and adjusting them to Korea, we have to build a totally different theory, which has its roots in the Korean environment, to do that, analyzing the consultations is crucial.

One of the major problems we are dealing with right now is teenage "Ivans." They are kicked out of their homes and schools, and even group homes, for teens don't welcome them. There are still a lot of instructors who think homosexuality is some contagious disease. We have to find out what teenage Ivans need, from their point of view, and moreover how to cultivate solidarity with teen activism.

The other problem is the coming out strategy. People are now more aware that unwanted outing should be avoided, but what really matters is to know when, how and to whom to come out. Korea not being a friendly place even for heterosexual single women, gets worse for an out and single lesbian. But the more people come out, the more will the closeted ones be able to realize that it is possible to reveal yourself, a woman loving woman as you are, and to live an independent life in this society. We need to gain this foothold.

CM: How do you turn all of these social problems into a legal framework? Is there a legal aspect of *Kirikiri* and how are you approaching that?

K: Legislative activism isn't lead or determined at an official level. Still, we all feel the need for small but actual changes, and know that legislations or amendments are indispensable stages to realize that change. Considering this, I think we can sort out three issues. The first one has to do with family law. Same-sex partnerships along with all kinds of familial unions should be given the right to constitute a legal family. I am not yet sure what the concrete legal form should be: should it be same-sex marriage or co-habitation agreements, or civil unions like PACS? There is a lot to think about. But the immutable principle is that speaking just for ourselves—homosexual couples—is meaningless; all outskirts of the heterosexual nuclear family should be taken into consideration.

The second issue is the anti-discrimination act. In 2007, sexual orientation didn't make it to one of the clauses due to conservative religious groups. I don't know if it will be included in this year's amendment; whatever the results, it is said that it won't have much practical effects during the Lee administration. In the meantime, some think that we need a special law that treats LGBTQs, apart from the larger, more general anti-discrimination law. I think these debates are themselves very meaningful.

The last one is same-sex sexual assaults, in which many issues overlap. *Chingusai* is taking action on military sexual assaults with the *Korea Sexual Violence Relief Center*, also on military criminal laws with the *Solidarity for LGBT Human Rights of Korea*. These movements give us support, but we do not stand in the same horizon. In Korea's current penal law, the rape victim is still stated as female, which is per se genital-centered and heterosexist. Even when, a few years ago, an MTF transsexual was first approved as a rape victim, the ruling itself was viewed in this light: it says, she counts as a rape victim because she has a vagina and because she can have sex with a man. How bizarre is this? Her being, though legally registered as male, justified as female, being relieved from additional harm, these are certainly significant; but that doesn't mean all details are flawless. This ruling can fail to notice same-sex sexual assaults. Moreover, while sexual assaults among bio-males are, the penis being in the picture, "imaginable," those among females aren't. Even lesbians don't recognize them. We have to expand the concept of sexual assaults.