

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

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An Interview with Hanmuji

May 30, 2010

Hanmuji's home, Seoul, Korea

Hanmuji: My name is Hanmuji. I am what people normally call FTM, but I identify myself as a trans man. The word "to" in "Female-*to*-Male" has so many connotations that I feel I can't fully express myself by saying that I have transitioned from female to male. In general, trans people try to erase their past before the surgery. But I still want to embrace the time when I had women's breasts, although they were so burdensome and hideous. That is why I use the term "trans man."

Carlos Motta: What is the situation of transgender people in Korea? How do you position yourself within a history of trans issues in this country?

H: Male-to-Female trans people are quite known in Korea thanks to Ha Risu [MTF transgender celebrity in Korea], but Female-to-Male trans people are still invisible. People don't know about it and don't really care. Some people say: "Is that even possible? Does that actually exist?" The web delivers a lot of incorrect information, for instance, that FTM surgery is done by transplanting an male penis, which is absurd! All these misconceptions combined make it difficult to shape a more accurate perception.

It is impossible even to imagine someone being FTM. Frankly speaking, nobody outside the LGBT community knows about my identity. I work as a network engineer at an IT company, but at work I am just a *normal* man. I haven't come out, I can't. Most FTM trans people are living a similar kind of life.

CM: Do you think it would be important to make your transition public in order to pave the way for other people to be able to think of an FTM identity as a possibility?

H: That is a tricky question. Personal desires and personal ideals always clash against one another. In 2005 a solidarity alliance regarding the special law on sexual reassignment for transgender people was formed. Twenty four groups came together, including the *Democratic Labor Party*, *Pinks* and many other sexual minority groups. During that process, the transgender rights organization *Jirungi* was founded and I served as its Chair for a while. The Resident Registration Number (RRN) of Korea indicates the holder's sex; women's starts with 2 and men's with 1. Trans people have to

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be post-operative to be able to change this number. The purpose of the alliance was to amend that.

If you want to get a job or to open a bank account in Korea you always have to show your RRN card. At the moment I present an RRN card that starts with the number 2, I become someone strange and suspicious. Korean employers are unwilling to hire trans persons. Even if I do get a job, I have to make up an excuse for my inconsistent RRN. To address this problem I use the intersex strategy: that I was born with ambiguous sex, and I was accidentally registered as a woman. Quite a lot of people find this offensive.

CM: Is there a legal structure for issues of discrimination against transgender people in Korea? Or is this not talked about at an official level?

H: There isn't any. That is the problem.

CM: But is there a community of activists that is trying to change things? Are you part of a larger group of people that are attempting to politicize these issues?

H: In Japan, they consider transgender people as individuals that suffer a sexual identity disorder and therefore are people that need protection. In Europe or the USA, transsexuality is considered a consequence of sexual self-determination, not a disability. People choose to be transgender because they feel like they don't belong to their biological sex.

In Korea we haven't been able to agree on either but we have done many things since 2005. We tried to form a discourse around the Sexual Reassignment Act by introducing ourselves to various television shows and news programs of the three major broadcasting stations in Korea, as well as to TV documentaries and talk shows dealing current issues, etc. We also wrote columns for newspapers and did interviews with the press. We conducted a one-year-research on the current conditions of FTM trans people by interviewing many of them; something that was later used as source material for the new law.

CM: Can you explain why this issue remains so invisible in Korea? Is it a moral attitude?

H: I guess the primary reason is because FTM trans don't necessarily have to disclose our gender identity. After FTM trans people receive a certain amount of treatment, nobody can ever doubt that they are men judging from their physical appearance. So FTM trans people do not necessarily insist on admitting to be trans publicly. If I say that I am actually a trans man to someone who has known me as a man, he/she will start to doubt my gender and ultimately will think of me as a woman. This results in discrimination and conflicts; this is the pain I have to go through. But hate crimes are not much of an issue in Korean society.

CM: What do you think is the relationship between tradition and religion with gender identity in Korean society?

H: I don't think this as a particular problem to Korea. Most of the people don't doubt their gender. It is common to think that if you are born with a woman's body, then you identify as a woman and if you are born with a man's body, you identify as a man. People take

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this for granted, as something undeniable and almost absolute. That is why people have prejudices towards transsexuality.

But a Korean characteristic may be reinforcing this prejudice: Koreans really like to mind other people's business; they come too close to others, they are too nosy. There is a sort of obsession here to change other people's thoughts when they think something is wrong. And, yes, there are issues related to religion, but that is the same in any other country.

CM: In Iran or in India, for example, being a transgender person is not too much of a problem, because you assume an identity that is gender specific, in other words you are either a man or a woman. In those countries it can be more difficult to be gay because you have sex with a person of your own gender, which is a threat to society. How is that here in Korea? If you decide to change and adapt to the other gender, would that be less of a threat?

H: Korean society does not know the difference between being a transgender and being gay. An MTF lesbian or an FTM gay is not imaginable to most people.

CM: It seems to me that there is a wall that cannot be penetrated, something that is so regimented in tradition that is hard to break down. What is the work that you and your community are trying to do besides speaking to the media? What are the steps that you are going to take to break down that wall?

H: Actually we are busy just taking care of the most pressing issues, like making official statements against trans-phobic remarks, which takes up a lot of our time. However we managed to join the march for peace did many collaborative works with activist groups and we have set up booths and handed out leaflets. I personally gave many lectures at sex education programs in universities, religious groups, and companies and also at the *Gender Equality Program* of the *Democratic Labor Party*. One of our recent actions considered the situation of transgender people who are serving sentences in prison. The correctional system doesn't allow hormone therapy within jail facilities, so we protested that they should be able to keep on receiving their treatment.

CM: Is there any medical support for the trans community in Korea? Unlike gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, the trans community often requires hormone treatment, vasectomies, etc. How is that situation dealt with in Korea?

H: I have had four mastectomies due to side effects. There is no system for transgender-related medical procedures in Korea, not to speak of insurance. In Japan for example there is such a system: to get diagnosed with gender identity disorder you need to consult a psychiatrist first and later move on to surgery procedures if desired. They also have related laws. But in Korea it is all up to the individual, from diagnosis to operation. The Internet community plays the biggest role for now.

CM: There is not a diagnosis here?

H: Gender Identity Disorder (GID) is listed as a mental disorder, doctors know it exists, but don't know how to treat it. When we visit the doctor we, ourselves, have to explain him/her what we need: "I'm transgender, and I need hormone replacement therapy" or "I need a

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mastectomy and a hysterectomy." If the doctor refuses, we will consult someone else. We have to do this over and over until someone finally accepts to treat us.

There are two hospitals that perform gender reassignment surgery in Korea. One is in Seoul, called *Saint Urology Clinic*; the doctor there is said to have been instructed by Dr. Perovic, who was well known for his genital reassignment surgery. But this Korean doctor maltreats his patients, not like anyone I have ever seen or heard of. He screams at his patients, has dropped patients off the operating table leading them to injuries... He does a horrible job and surcharges the patients for additional surgery, kicks out patients who underwent general anesthesia the day before because "there's no room"... I had a serious fight with him once. The other place is the *Dong-A University Hospital*; but it is very expensive and the results are terrible with too many side effects. Practically, there is nowhere to go in Korea.

CM: So is this pushing people to go to other countries to be operated?

H: Yes. MTF trans people usually go to Thailand and FTM people to Japan.

CM: Does the Korean State take any responsibility for this kind of medical malpractice?

H: No. Politicians never introduce bills unless they get some benefit in return. And a bill that hasn't been legislated obviously doesn't lead to judicial or administrative reform. The *Democratic Labor Party's* Assembly representative Roh Hoe-chan tried once, but since it was the end of the Roh Moo-hyun administration and a lot of bills were being introduced, ours didn't make it to Assembly. The reason was that it is of little importance to them.

CM: Is the Korean trans community in communication with international LGBT organizations? Could a foreign organization name this as an international human rights violation?

H: I have tried but to be frank, I have been too busy with internal problems.

CM: You seem to be a young person, is there an activist older than you that has already been doing this kind of work?

H: I am 32 years old now and most of the activists here are between 28 and 35. Older people participate in interviews, surveys or debates, but they don't get directly involved.

CM: I think this is significant, because there seems to be a change taking place with your generation; older trans people were silent. What has changed within your generation to be able to speak up publicly? What has empowered you?

H: Actually there is nobody that we can really call "older generation." In Korea FTM identification and transition only began when they learned that such a thing was possible. Before they felt like they didn't belong in their bodies. The lack of words made it impossible for them to understand what *that* feeling meant. FTM trans people that are older than me, those in their 40-60s, understood their situation late. Most of them had lived their lives as lesbians until the 1990s. When the Internet started providing information, only after this began, they understood who they were and started treatment.

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When I was first getting started with activism, Internet communities were beginning to flourish: through the web we made friends, exchanged surgical information, etc. Before this FTM trans people had no place to gather; the MTF community had the bars in Itaewon, but we didn't even know whether other FTM people existed.

CM: What is the relationship between the transgender community and the gay and lesbian community in Korea? Do you feel part of the LGB-T category? In different countries I have visited, transgenderism is considered as an issue of gender identity and not of sexual orientation. How does that work here?

H: The FTM transgender community is very macho, dividing masculinity and femininity. It has sort of an obsession that we must act manly to prove that we are men. For example, I say "oops" a lot, but because it is normally thought of as a girly expression, people in the FTM community react like: "Oh, come on, be a man!"

It is true that I had my macho days. I always had to give an explanation for being a man, but seriously, who knows? No one understands the body. Not knowing the reason, the best way I could make proof of my identity was to act and show off my masculinity. I used really tough gestures and language. However, the more I got used to being a man, I naturally gave up these habits. Nowadays I forget that I am an FTM.

The bigger problem I am facing now is about being gay. As an FTM gay, it is very difficult for me to feel attachment towards the FTM community. They are very macho and manly, but I am not. I like the so-called "girly" things. The Korean trans community can't understand the fact that I like men. The trans community is homophobic and the gay and lesbian community is transphobic. The LGB and T communities all conducted their movements separately and now we are too far apart.

CM: Is there something else that you want to talk about in terms of work, politics or your personal life?

H: I always value communication. I enjoy having the chance to talk with others, to get over misunderstandings and discard prejudices. Sharing the same gender identity and belonging to the same group don't mean that we go through the same problems in life. I want to have more of these encounters, opportunities to communicate and to share my experiences with other people.