

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

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An Interview with Jeongyol

June 3, 2010

Solidarity for LGBT Rights of Korea Office, Seoul, Korea

Jeongyol: I am Jeongyol. I have been an active member of the *Solidarity for LGBT Human Rights of Korea* for almost 13 years. The current issues I am working on are HIV/AIDS, LGBT teens and labor.

Carlos Motta: Can you talk about how you established this office? Who is working with you and what is the kind of work that you are doing?

J: *SLGBTHR* was founded in 1997 to problematize the poor conditions of sexual minority rights in Korea. All sexual minorities can join *SLGBTHR*. 80% of the members are gay, 15% are lesbian and 5% are bisexual and/or transgender. It is a young group; most of the members are under 40. About 100 members are registered and about two dozens of them are active participants.

SLGBTHR works to improve the life, the human rights and the happiness and of LGBT individuals. However, we think it is important to show solidarity to non-LGBT subjects as well, and we try to do that as much as possible. We take part of collective actions, campaigns and rallies that treat different subjects, to let everyone know that we are there, that we are one of them. We hope that when our members confront an obstacle, those who seek social change will come and support us as we support them.

CM: Can you speak about the strategies that you use internally to address the issue of activism in the context of present-day Korean society?

J: The main precepts of our organization are action and solidarity. But these two are not that simple to most of the members. Disclosing yourself can be very threatening and intimidating to some individuals. We can't force them to do it. Rather, we try to share with them the positive effects that public action can bring. For example, at a anti-war demonstration, we understand that they can be afraid to stand near the rainbow flag; however, protesting war as an LGBT means much more than protesting solely for political reasons. We explain to our members why we have to stand under this flag, and listen to their opinions, constantly receiving feedback. We openly discuss with one another the meaning of speaking out as LGBT subjects on political issues. This is easier said than done, though. It really is not a simple task. However, after 10 years of communicating with the members, I believe things have improved. If we keep on working, and more members join, a solid foundation will be formed for future members.

CM: Would you say that the difference between the *queer* and the other minority communities is the fact that the *queer* community is not fully recognized in Korean society, whereas for example nobody doubts the recognition of workers?

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J: Most Koreans are still indifferent to LGBT subjects, their lives, their issues and circumstances. I sometimes sense that a huge change has taken place, but then again, it is still not enough. For instance, when people fight for labor issues, it is common that LGBT labor is not considered. In Korea, LGBT individuals are simply LGBT; even though there are so many kinds of us—LGBT teens, LGBT struggling with HIV, LGBT undergoing family issues, LGBT having problems at work—they just categorize us all under a plain LGBT category. So we have to speak for ourselves, raise our rainbow flag and bring in our own labor issues. We speak up, make appeals, debate, argue, sometimes even fight. We need to do this more.

We approach all issues as our own, not as something apart from us. What we search for is the way to deliver our version of a given issue. Our primary concern is to grow public recognition on LGBT issues, and to gather supporters. We are often disappointed, but we need to stay strong. In Korea, the labor rally is quite a big event. Before they only spoke of "social minorities," a very general and vague term, where LGBT subjects were left in the dark. But nowadays they use direct terms such as sexual minorities or gays during the rallies.

We sometimes make aggressive and provocative moves. Schoolteachers are probably the most conservative group in Korea, but we point to the fact that most certainly there can be homosexuals amongst them, and that they can be great teachers to young people.

CM: Is the solidarity that your organization shows reciprocal? In other words, are those other minority organizations recognizing LGBTQ issues as part of their struggle? Or is it an initiative that is not necessarily bouncing back?

J: I am afraid so. However, positive responses are slowly increasing. I believe that when we get trapped in society's homophobic reactions, when we start a fight with our own strategies, the people that we have met during our collective actions will come to support us.

In 2003, one of our teen members committed suicide. At that time we were participating in the anti-Iraq War demonstrations, and he was with us all the time. After his suicide, we spoke of him at a demonstration, about the situation that drove this young person, deserted by his family and school, to kill himself. Protesting war and sexual minority discrimination may seem like two separate problems, but they are not. When we organized a memorial ceremony for him, among the people that came were those who we met at the anti-war rally, more than 300 of them! So many people came that there wasn't enough space for everybody. We mourned together and encouraged each other. This makes me believe that those who we communicate with now will someday show solidarity to us.

CM: What is *SLGBTHR*'s relationship to State and other formal institutions? I understand that you are doing some work that concerns harassment in the military. How do you tackle these problems?

J: Government officials don't even know what sexual minorities are. I have been contacting them quite often these days, but I can't say that they are of any help on making political or institutional changes. Sometimes they only get in the way, which was the case with the anti-discrimination act. Even though government officials should be informed more than anybody about our issues and circumstances. Especially military personnel, because they get to encounter gays firsthand quite often.

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In Korea it is obligatory for men to serve two years in the army, and being gay can't be an excuse. Those two years of living in an exposed communal space with absolutely no privacy can be very tough and intimidating for gay men. The army is actually well informed on gay issues, but not so much to respect them, but rather to prohibit and repress them. Gays sometimes suffer physical violence. A more common case is stigmatization; gays undergo countless misunderstandings for every little action. The situation is very harsh.

In my view, government officials must have at least basic knowledge of this situation and know how to deal with it. That is why we at *SLGBTHR* and at *Chingusai* published a booklet for them to read and get informed. We sent it to them- whether they actually read it or not we don't know. I have to admit that the government has no interest in sexual minorities. But we will keep on pushing anyway to build a greater sensibility regarding our human rights and for a less prejudiced view of our identities.

CM: What exactly does the booklet say and what has been the reaction to it?

J: There have been no reactions whatsoever. We put a lot of effort into making the booklet, but we didn't expect them to respond to it. We thought that maybe if we sent the booklets through institutions within the *Ministry of National Defense*, we might receive some actual feedback; but our efforts to contact them were in vain. Some non-LGBT people I personally know made the remark that the information in the booklets is essential and that they really deserve to be read.

We made two versions: one for those who are gay, and the other for those who are not. The first one contains information on the difficulties and threats that you are likely to encounter within the military as a gay man, and on how to contact us or *Chingusai*; places where they can share their problems. We advise them not to keep to themselves and to reach out for help. The second one treats the importance of LGBT issues within the military. It also gives specific guidelines to follow when coming across gay soldiers. For instance, not to be upset or embarrassed by them but to support them and not to reject them. Normally they just don't know how to cope with the situation.

CM: What is the kind of activism does *SLGBTHR* do regarding HIV/AIDS?

J: HIV/AIDS is a crucial, indispensable issue within the gay community, but that doesn't mean that it is solely in our hands. There is also another organization called *Nanuri Plus*, founded in 2003, with which *Chingusai* works. The members of *Nanuri Plus* come from all fields; they are medical professionals, scholars, gays, HIV/AIDS patients, lesbians, etc.

The question we really have to ask ourselves within the gay community is, where did the abhorrence and taboo towards HIV come from? People living with HIV are often not tolerated by the gay community. Korea's HIV community is, to be frank, generally discriminated, but the attitude of the gay community towards them is sometimes shockingly scary. How can they behave like this, knowing that our friends may be amongst them? LGBT people are often turning our backs on each other.

Condoms are an everyday thing in Korean gay society. There are even condom distribution centers supported by the government. I think that condoms are essential for protecting your body from many diseases. However, giving out condoms is the least thing that can be done. For people living with HIV/AIDS to come out, they need to secure their rights to treatment and medication and need to feel like they can live in more comfortable circumstances.

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The sad thing is that oftentimes after people test HIV positive, they no longer visit the condom distribution centers because somebody might notice them and then the word will spread... And once you get into relationships while concealing the fact that you are HIV positive, the risk of HIV infection rises, no matter if you have a million condoms.

To me, condoms are just something extra. There are bigger problems to take care of, which require a lot of effort. We need to come together and search for ways to change the environment itself within the gay community. Yes, it is a difficult and challenging job, but homosexuals should not shy away from HIV issues.

CM: I understand that you are the subject of a film that is soon coming out, which focuses more on your personal story rather than on your work as an activist. Can you tell me about your participation in the film, and if you feel comfortable talking about it, about your personal story?

J: First of all, I had confidence in Hyeok-sang LEE, the director of the film. His works are very delicate and heart-warming. When I first received the offer, I wanted to contribute to the film, but I had my worries. I know very well that my life—having a normal day job and being an activist—is not the average life of a Korean gay. I feared that my appearance would seem like nothing ordinary; something that people might point at and say, “That is really ignoring the reality.” Additionally, that wasn’t my idea of a coming out.

To be frank, I live and act as a gay at work in *SLGBTHR*, but I seldom do so elsewhere. With my family and colleagues, I just simply work and talk, without deliberately exposing my *gayness*. I wonder how they will react to this movie and what consequences it will have. Actually I’m just trying to act cool but inside I am literally worried to death. I am worried about my family, about my job... The film captures not only me, but also my partner and my friends. A fair amount of the movie is dedicated to HIV/AIDS issues. The personal reason I am dedicated to HIV/AIDS activism is because of my partner, who is HIV positive and I’m negative. Despite all this, I believe that the film will have greatly positive effects.

CM: Thank you. Is there anything else you would like to share with me before we finish?

J: This is a message to all of you who are reading this interview: I haven’t been able to explain enough the actions currently taking place in Korea, but I want you to know that many LGBT people in Korea are doing things to try to make our situation better and our lives happier. I guess a lot of you will be somewhat frustrated by Korean policies or institutions. There are many unknown LGBT lives that couldn’t make it to this interview. If we reach out to those lives, they will be able to enjoy better conditions, and someday we all will be living in a world where we are not *special* and where everybody will get along. And finally, please note that there are a lot of Korean gays that are much prettier than I am! Bye!